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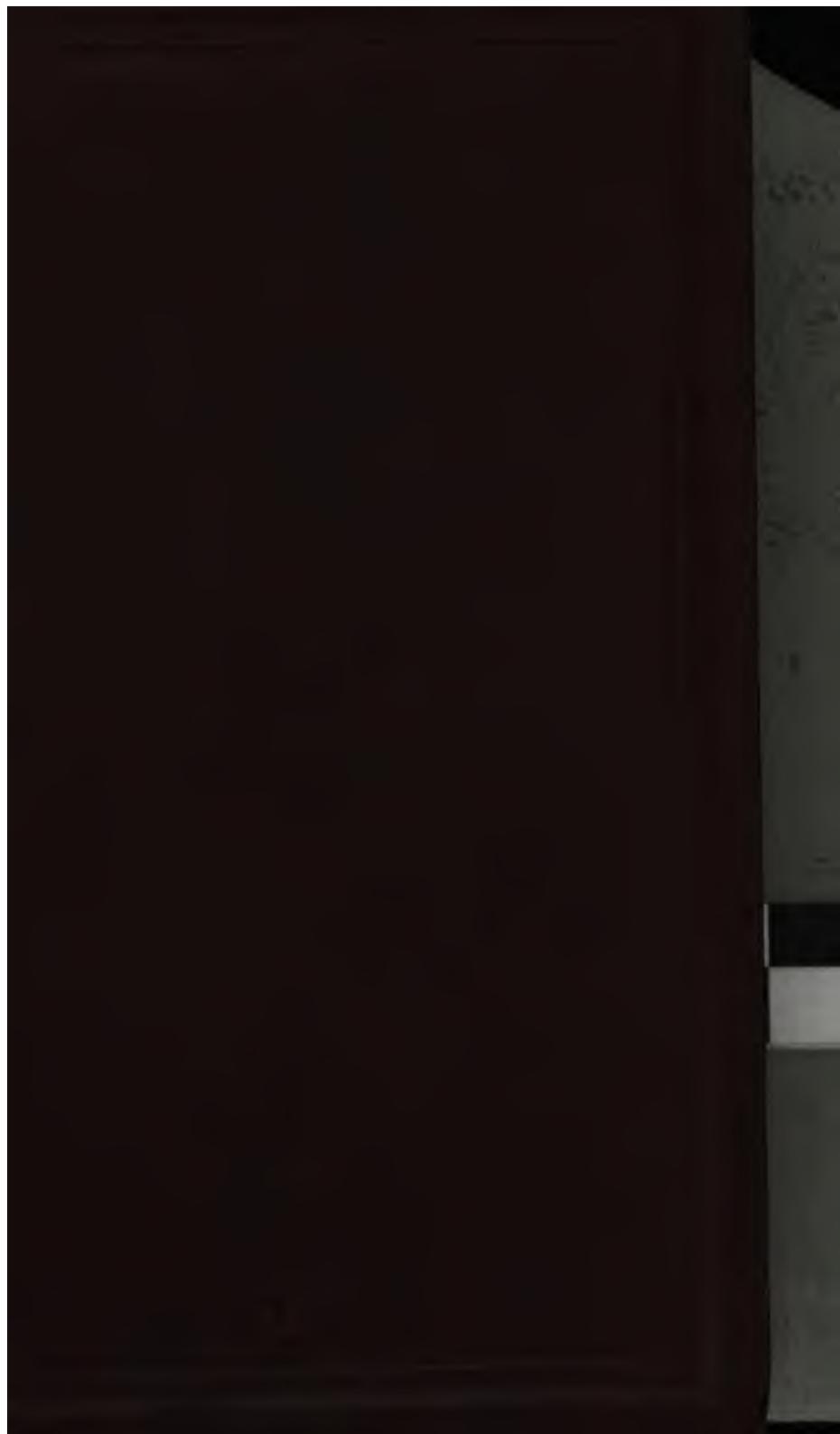
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# **A CHILD OF FORTUNE.**

**VOL. III.**



# A CHILD OF FORTUNE.

BY

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“OFF PARADE,”  
“KINGS BEECHES,” “THE OLD DRAGOON,”  
&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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# A CHILD OF FORTUNE.

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## CHAPTER I.

"THEN I AM RUINED, UTTERLY RUINED!"

MR. MARTIN sat in his office in deep study, and yet the nature of his reading was such as few would have thought to be in need of great mental application.

He was engaged in the perusal of a country gentleman's newspaper, and the more immediate subject occupying his attention was that of thrush in horses, and some new-fangled remedy which had only just been propounded. For, if Mr. Martin was anything, he was a sportsman. He came from a good old county stock, but, being a younger son, his love of country life and country amusements had been early nipped in the bud by a stern father, who sent him to Lon-

don to make his fortune in a solicitor's office. The young Martin, much as he at first hated and abhorred the town life he had to endure, soon came to think it passable, then pleasant as well as profitable; but he never forgot his native soil, and on every possible opportunity he was to be found hovering round the old family nest, and enjoying, with a zest all the keener that they were rare, the sports of the country in their fullest perfection. Besides that, his business being essentially a family one, he had many agencies, &c., &c., which took him a good deal out of London, and gave him every opportunity of good shooting, fishing, and hunting. The latter was his especial weakness, and though he was now tolerably well stricken in years, he never—frost being absent—missed his two days a week from the metropolis; while, if on business down in some fair hunting country during the season, he often got a good run with a strange pack, and was never placed badly at the finish, however new to him the lie of the land might be.

Of a long, slender, angular build, he was just about medium weight, and, therefore, not diffi-

cult to mount; while his well-known and well-deserved character as a judicious rider procured for him many a leg up on nags that would not have been entrusted to any other stranger or semi-stranger. In his office he was, or pretended to be, for some occult reason, very short-sighted; in the hunting-field he wore a glass screwed down to the rim of his hat, but it had been observed that whenever Tom Martin wished to see a thing particularly well, he thrust the glass on one side; and hence had arisen the legend that his blindness was only a convenient sham for the better handling of clients. He kept good horses himself, large, roomy animals, with a fair dash of blood and plenty of bone and muscle, but he never lent them. He had a maxim which he most rigorously employed *towards* others; to himself *from* others he did not think it was applicable. It was, "Never lend your dog, gun, or horse."

His character was a curious compound of the shrewd business man of law and the country gentleman; but perhaps its leading features were selfishness, and, strange to say, love of kin. Tom Martin was the first person to be considered;

after that, the rest of the Martin family. He was social in his habits when in the country, and a pleasanter table-companion it would be hard to find; but when in London he lived absolutely alone—a bachelor of bachelors, and one who did not seem to have the slightest desire for society, or even companionship in his own house. Abroad, he was excellently received everywhere. His fund of anecdote was immense, and it was always admirably suited to the society in which he found himself. So that he was really all things to all men, and was an especial favourite with elderly ladies desirous of enjoying the appetising little stories which had perhaps not been permitted them in their younger days. The family secrets he knew, were something astonishing in quantity—but he was a thoroughly trustworthy confidant, and only spoke of the more delicate relations of such persons as were not *his* clients, but whose little stories he had managed to ferret out from too talkative members of his own profession, whose tongues might be loosened with sound old Club port.

Thus he was a perfectly “safe” man to deal with, and was true as steel to those families

with whose more intimate affairs he had been entrusted.

A whistle through the speaking-tube, conveniently placed handy to the back of his easy chair. A hoarse voice followed with the remark, "Telegram for you, sir!"

"Bring it up," was his order, through the same medium; and in a minute or two a lanky and pimpled young clerk entered with the message.

It was from Captain Fitzallan, at Kilbeggan, and was far longer than such despatches usually are. Mr. Martin glanced over it with features entirely devoid of expression, and then he dismissed the clerk, with directions to send the telegraph-boy away, as he had no return message to send—as yet. Then he put off his gold nose-spectacles, and read the message through with the deepest attention. This was how it ran :

"A terrible shock. News from India corroborates horrible lie about my not being related to General Fitzallan, but being the son of a soldier named Smythe, who died in disgrace. Had heard this before, but of course could not be-

lieve it. It is some wicked plot got up to ruin me with Lady C——. Did not tell you before, because thought it was too ridiculous. Now there seems serious conspiracy, which will have to fight. Wire at once what you know of my birth, for I must be quite satisfied before marriage can go on. Do not delay a moment. I wait answer here."

"Whe-ee-ew!" whistled out Tom Martin, when he had finished reading the message. "I always thought there was something suspicious about that move of old Fitzallan's with regard to this Roberts. Roberts, yes, that was the name; but how did he get it? By Jove! there's something in this to startle one. 'Son of a soldier:' 'died in disgrace:' 'wicked plot:' 'serious conspiracy:' 'marriage can't go on'—I should think not, indeed, with this sort of thing hanging over our heads. Now I always thought that young fellow was remarkably silent about himself—so different from most Army chaps. Never seemed to place any confidence in me—always cold and stand-off. Let me see: 'did not tell you before, because thought it was too ridiculous.' Ah! you'll know better next time,

young man, than to keep this sort of thing from your business agent. Just serves you right. Well, what's to be done? I know nothing about him, except what old Fitzallan told me when writing to me about the will he had made. He might have left his money and name to 'Brown, Jones, and Robinson,' just as well as to Roberts, for all anyone could say to the contrary. But, by Jove! this must be looked to at once."

Mr. Martin got up, as was his habit when alone and thinking over any important point, and paced the room as if it was the quarter-deck of a yacht.

"He's in a d——d mess, beyond all question; but what can a man who knows none of the circumstances do to get him out of it? This may be the beginning of a case of the greatest importance. I should see him—certainly I should see him at once. Better run over and nail him on the spot. 'Kilbeggan.' By Jove! there ought to be a good salmon or two to be picked up, even now. I'll go."

He whistled down the tube, and immediately despatched the following message:

"Shall leave London for Kilbeggan by night mail. Act as if no letters received. Keep cool, and have room ready for me. Personally know nothing on point; but no doubt General Fitzallan's account perfectly true, and other story got up for reasons. Say nothing whatever to living being of letters until you see me."

Tom Martin then extracted from their own large safe, or strong-box, all the Fitzallan papers of which he was in possession—they were, for such a complicated property as the General's, but very few—glanced over the endorsements, which process was quite sufficient, at least for the present, to bring their spirit back to his practised memory; and then, having spent half an hour in the work, he placed them in a leather travelling-case, specially devised for the purpose; and, after a glance at his watch, resumed his study of *Land and Water* without the slightest distraction. At his usual time he walked down to his Club and had his dinner: then back to his own residence—he had no other office; and, just as he was about to start for Euston, a second telegram was put into his hands from Captain Fitzallan.

"Have been refused admission to the Castle. I start for Dublin at once. Meet me on your arrival in the Imperial Hotel, where I shall stop. Papers missing, and must have been stolen from my room."

"Pshaw!" snorted out Tom Martin, in intense disgust, "'papers missing and must have been stolen.' What a d——d young fool he must be! I'd wager a cool hundred he left them kicking about for everyone to see, and then he whines out about their being taken advantage of. I've no patience with such careless people!" Then he jumped into his cab, and was whirled off.

The first man he saw on the pier at Kingstown the next morning, waiting the arrival of the mail-boat, was Captain Fitzallan, but so changed, so worn, so broken-looking that the solicitor positively would not have known him had he not half expected that his client would be there, and was consequently on the lookout.

"My dear sir," he cried, "what on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

There was a sickly smile of despair on the

young officer's face as he answered, hurriedly,

"Nothing, nothing—only no sleep—want of rest and anxiety, I suppose. This is far more serious than you imagine. Just read that letter from the Calcutta agents."

But Tom Martin was not that sort of man at all. He never jumped to conclusions; neither did he allow himself to discuss business matters except in a business way, and in business hours. However, he saw that he must make some allowance for the state of one in such a plight as was Fitzallan, so he, to use his own expression, let him down gently.

"Yes, I see, I see," he said, hurriedly glancing over the letter, and then putting it carefully into his pocket; "but this requires calmness and privacy to be properly judged of. I am not fit to examine it now—travelling all night, you know. The train is just off. Jump in; and you really must give me a few hours' rest—you really must, Captain Fitzallan, I'm dead tired."

He then made a few common-place remarks to his agonized companion; but the train had hardly got as far as Salt Hill, when he feigned sleepiness, adjusted his travelling-cap over his

eyes, and dozed away the journey, until they arrived in Dublin, and were driven to the Imperial. There he ordered a mouthful of breakfast in his private room, and declaring that he *must* rest, he dismissed his unfortunate client to wander miserably up and down the streets, while he lay down on his bed and was soon fast asleep. At an hour after noon Mr. Martin was called, had a good wash, and on entering his sitting-room with all his papers, &c., he found Fitzallan returned, and burning with anxiety to go at once into the whole case.

With feverish eagerness he told the wary solicitor, who took copious notes of it all, the story, so far as he himself knew it, from the very commencement of the hints that had been dropped about his antecedents by the Wrigleys and others. When he first brought Creasey's name into the tale, his voice faltered, and he found considerable difficulty in telling occurrences that he knew now, when it was too late, must stamp him as little better than a fool in the eyes of a man of business. Martin noticed the hesitation, and discounted its meaning without the slightest mental trouble; but he

gave the other no assistance whatever, for the reason that he always let a client tell his first tale in his own way ; while he, the solicitor, used the almost inevitable embarrassment as an excellent guide to a full knowledge of that client's character. With the proposed marriage part of the business Mr. Martin was, of course, perfectly familiar ; and when Fitzallan told of the missing letter from the Rev. Mr. Burdin, of Mrs. Birt's, which fully confirmed the Creasey version of his antecedents, and referred to the Calcutta agents' (who had done business for the Rev. Mr. Bartram, the guardian of the young Roberts) communication, which, in precise and very plain language, was also corroborative of the same narrative, then the case was ended, and Mr. Martin knew just every bit as much about it as did Fitzallan himself.

“ Well, and this letter, this guarantee from Creasey ? He must be a d——d scoundrel ! ”

“ That I can't make out. I certainly had it a day or two before I left for Kilbeggan, for I was reading it, and——”

“ You don't mean to tell me you have lost it ? ” cried the other, starting up in horror at such, to him, criminal neglect.

"I can't find it," said the other, doggedly. "I searched up and down, every nook and corner and pocket, when I got those cursed Indian letters, but I could not find it anywhere. If I had not made such a strict search, I would have thought the Colonel took it off with him, as he doubtless took off Mr. Burdin's."

"You're sure he took that?"

"No one else could, or would have taken it. Unless he did, how could the Earl have ordered me not to be admitted?"

"True. Could the paper have been stolen from you at Chorlbury?"

"It *could*, I suppose; but it is very unlikely."

"Humph! I don't think so," was Mr. Martin's dry reply. "So that it amounts to this—Creasey holds a sound document from you—that's not lost, *I know*—in bar of legal proceedings, while you have not so much as a screed of writing to show that the man is a liar and a scoundrel."

Fitzallan heaved a deep sigh, and then his head sunk into his hands. It was as the solicitor had said: and the bitterness of the hour was made a hundredfold more bitter by the

knowledge of his own intense folly and carelessness.

Mr. Martin sat and pondered for quite half an hour without saying a word; only every now and then he referred to his notes—to the letters Fitzallan had given him, and to the documents he had brought from London. The younger man rose, and paced the room. He could not rest; his blood was at fever-heat; his brain seemed to be on fire; his mind was working almost beyond control.

“Well, and what are you going to do?” asked Mr. Martin in the most matter-of-fact way, when his meditations had come to an end.

“What am I going to do!” repeated Fitzallan in astonishment, and pausing in his restless walk,—“what am I going to do! That is just what I want you to tell me.”

“Yes, but I must have some instructions, or, at least, some line to follow.”

“I have no instructions to give—unless you prosecute that devilish Creasey—and that you seem to think you can’t. I want advice; nothing more.”

"That's just, my dear sir, what it is most difficult to give in an affair of this sort. It's the most awkward case I ever knew, without exception; and I question very much if the wisest plan is not to leave it alone altogether."

"How leave it alone?" cried the other, fiercely. "Do you believe these lies?"

"What I believe matters not one jot. If it is any satisfaction to you, I may say that I don't credit a word of this Creasey's story, because I can see no earthly reason why the General should keep such important facts—the most important facts of all—from the Indian firm of solicitors who drafted his will; and he *must* have kept it a dead secret from them, or I feel certain I should have heard of it. I can, however, quite understand that, to save your feelings when you grew up, he gave out to the world what we will call the Roberts version of the affair. But, beyond all question, a jury, if it could come before one—though I don't see how it could, as the will is not disputed, and you have no hold whatever on Creasey—a jury, judging from what you have told me, and from these documents, could not help arriving at the

conclusion that you—pardon me, it is best to be plain—you are what these people say."

Fitzallan groaned deeply; then he sat down again, and rose again, for the restlessness of his nervous system was uncontrollable.

"Then I am ruined!" he gasped out hoarsely,—"utterly ruined! What can I do?—oh, heavens! what can I do!" And he flung himself into the chair again, stretching out his arms full length on the table, and hiding his haggard face on them.

"There is one thing you can do, Captain Fitzallan," said the solicitor, rising and touching the prostrate form kindly on the shoulder, "one thing you ought to do—be a man!"

"A man! Ay, a man of the most degraded class—the son of a felon, and—worse—a man for the whole world to despise and scorn! Oh yes, a man, perhaps, in form; in reality the meanest wretch that crawls the earth!" was the despairing wail that rose up from that quivering mass of humanity writhing in its great agony.

"H'sh, h'sh! you mustn't speak like that. I'm astonished, Captain Fitzallan!—fairly astonished at you! You, a bold fellow, that never

shrank from any danger ; a soldier of distinguished courage in the field—a soldier, Captain Fitz-allan, and——”

Somehow the word soldier roused him to a sense of his weakness. He *was* a soldier, every inch of him, and if he was feeble, and broken, and womanish now, it was his feelings, his affections, his mind that had given way ; his spirit was still within him, strong and courageous, and the word soldier brought it all back to him. He collected himself, and sprang to his feet. He dashed from his eyes a moisture that had forced its way in spite of him ; he steadied himself with all the strength of will that was left to him, and when he spoke there was more naturalness in his tone, and more firmness, than it had known during the whole previous portion of the critical interview.

“ A soldier be it, then,” he said. “ I *must* be that for many a weary year yet. And I suppose I can exchange again—a pariah, wandering from regiment to regiment, seeking rest in vain, seeking friendship, seeking—ay”—he broke off and smiled bitterly—“ ay, seeking for that which I shall never find. A soldier be it !”

Then he changed his tone. “But are you sure, perfectly certain, that I cannot wring justice out of the law against this devil out of hell—this Creasey?”

“On the first view of the case, you certainly can not. You have *lent* him five thousand pounds, you have taken no acknowledgment from him, you have lost the only paper, and I doubt if it was worth anything at all, that might have given you a hold on him; and he has securely, you may take your oath of it, a paper from you, duly witnessed, declaring you have no grounds for proceeding against him. No, Captain Fitzallan, you can do nothing, so far as I can now judge; but you will excuse me for saying that you have no one to blame but yourself.”

“How so?” He was calm now, the calmness of sustained and certain misery.

“By keeping your own counsel alone in this matter,” was the firm reply. “If you had come to me at once, all this might have been stopped; at least, you would certainly not have had to fling away £5,000 on a worthless blackguard.”

"Pshaw! what's the money to me? Nothing whatever. Look here, Mr. Martin, you know nearly all now, and may as well hear the rest. I would give every farthing I have in the world—I would have given my life itself—sooner than that this cursed lie—for lie it *is*, I *know* it—sooner than that this doubly damned falsehood should have shamed me in the eyes of her—of—"

Mr. Martin interrupted him hastily. The man was becoming again fearfully excited, and the solicitor well knew these fits of rage, love, despair, and self-hate could not go on much longer without the most disastrous consequences.

"I won't hear it, Captain Fitzallan; I'll hear no more. You're not in a fit state to talk of business now; you should not even be left alone, unless you can be bolder, braver, more manly, and again I say, more like the true soldier you are."

"There, I will be better presently." He threw his arms down, while Mr. Martin asked him,

"Are there no friends you could pay a visit to? I do not like to leave you."

"Friends!" The bitterness of that laugh was most intense. "I have no friends, not one, in the whole living world."

"But surely—surely in the regiment—some-where or other you must have some ac-quaintance more intimate than another--some——"

"No, Mr. Martin, I have not. I have all my life nearly been alone—alone often in the densest crowd, for I never seemed to have any people of my own to introduce me, and all that; and I have been too short a time in 'The Eagles' to make any friendships, even if there were any that I cared about. Alone, quite alone, past, present, and future!"

The solicitor did not at all like this heart-wrung wail. It was too vehement, too real, too cruel in its unpremeditated nature to be other than very serious, and Mr. Martin was fairly perplexed. He saw that the man's mind was quite untuned, if not partially unhinged, by the cruel treatment he had experienced at Dumore Castle, as a climax to his previous suf-ferings; and he felt that Fitzallan should not be left alone, at least until he had calmed

down very considerably from his present state of hot excitement. It was awkward, however, to get him into the right groove, more especially as Mr. Martin had no idea of his present intentions. He thought for a brief moment, and then he rang the bell for a "Bradshaw."

"H'm!" he muttered, as he turned over the pages, "there's not so much time, after all." Then he added aloud: "I must be off by the night-mail. I suppose, Captain Fitzallan, you're not going my way?"

"I don't know that I'm going any way," he answered, in a tone of profound dejection. "I may as well stay here. I've three months' leave—marriage leave! ha! ha!" (his laugh was horrid to hear, so discordant and unnatural was it) "and I don't suppose they'll cancel it; at least, not yet a bit."

"Oh! then if you have that leave, you're all right, and can come back to London with me. My dear sir, I'm delighted it is so. We can talk your affairs over at leisure in town, and go into all the ins and the outs of the matter thoroughly!"

He rang the bell again, ordered up some

biscuits and sherry at once, gave directions for an early and uncommonly neat little dinner, to be consumed in time to catch the night boat for Holyhead; and then he chartered a trap, and took Fitzallan off with him for a long drive round the most beautiful portions of the most beautiful park in the kingdom—Phoenix Park.

And so back to London, in good case, taking with him the unfortunate young officer, whom, only a day or two ago, half the world would have envied.

## CHAPTER II.

## WHAT CHORLBURY THOUGHT OF IT ALL.

THE Wrigleys were triumphant—the triumph of virtue over vice! On the very day when the wedding of their enemy (for so they regarded Fitzallan) and Lady Clara Burton had been arranged for, a telegram was received by Major Houghton from Colonel Calverley, with the astounding news that, “owing to unfortunate and most extraordinary circumstances,” the marriage had been, at the last moment, postponed *sine die*, and the Major was requested to make the news known throughout the regiment.

The Mess was in a ferment. What could have happened? Instinctively the minds of all flew back to the rumours which had been long before in circulation, and it was, almost without exception, determined that these rumours had culminated into something tangible, and that at

last (for they had been studiously kept from him) the Colonel had found them out, moreover had found them to be *true*, and hence the ‘extraordinary circumstances’ the telegram announced. Nor were “The Eagles” kept long in suspense as to the particulars, so far as they were known, of the event.

Billy Somerton, the “best man”—he had been away on a fishing excursion on the day of the arrival of the Indian letters which had caused the affair—put in an appearance a few hours after the receipt of the telegram, and he told the tale, in his own slipshod manner, to an eager and inquisitive audience. Not that he knew all the ins and outs of the case. The Colonel had been in such a wild rage that he was hardly comprehensible, but Billy had managed to gather from him, and from Dumore (the latter also in a very considerable fog) the main features of the discovery that had been made.

“I’d bin out whipping a stunning stream, ’egad! twenty miles away. Fitz got a budget of letters, Indian ones, sent on from here, and, after kicking all the things round his room, galloped off to telegraph to some fellow. Then

down comes the old Chief to look him up, finds him out, goes up to his room, and picks up some —'egad it must have bin a startler, for the Chief goes back to the Castle with the letter in his pocket, and holloas like mad for Dumore. They got closeted together for a time, then off to the lodge to tell the people there to keep Fitz out at any price ; and then, at lunch, it begins to get whispered about that the match is broken off, that Fitz is some d——d low impostor—just the tale we had here—and the sooner they make themselves scarce the better. Most of them took the hint and went off at once, but some stayed to see the fun out. But, Lord bless you ! there was nothing to see. When I got back Fitz was gone, without as much as leaving a message for me ; and when I got up to the Castle to hear what all the row was about—for the people at the inn said there must be a d——d row, for they never saw two men so scared as the Chief and Fitzallan—when I got there I found that there had been an awful scene ; reg'lar blow-up, curses and faints, and burnt feathers, and blasphemy of all sorts, 'egad——"

"Do go on, Billy; and sensibly, if you can manage it," put in young Thorpe, impatiently.

"Well, I *am* going on," was the reproachful answer. "Well, there was a reg'lar turn-down with Lady Clara, and the old man, and Dumore, all going on at one another like mad, and—"

"Who was your informant, Billy?" asked one of the fellows crowding round him.

"Well, partly one, partly another—most of it from Lady Clara's maid, for the Chief couldn't be trusted."

"Ahem!" sneered somebody, "but Billy Somerton could!"

"Of course I could, Darton, and *was*, 'egad."

"Do leave him alone, and let him tell his story his own way!" said another.

"There's precious little more to tell, 'egad. Lady Clara got in such an awful state that they sent off for two doctors, thinking her head was going; old Calverley stamped, and cursed, and swore enough to blow the roof off the tumble-down old place! and Dumore went quietly away and got blind drunk in his own den—at least, if I'm any judge, for I'll be hanged if he could put two words together at the time I saw him."

"Well, go on, Billy ; what then ?"

"There's no more. The Chief, as well as he could, said it was proved that Fitz wasn't Fitz at all, but the son of some miserable devil of a private who died in quod, and that he'd a great mind to have him locked up and transported—that he had broken Lady Clara's heart, and a lot of that sort of stuff. 'Egad, the old man didn't well know what he was saying ; but when I said I'd heard all the yarn before—here in this blessed Mess-room, he turned on me like a tiger, and swore we were all in the conspiracy to ruin his niece !"

"And what did you say to that, Billy ?"

"Well, I said that I had thought at the time it was none of my business ; and was, besides, certain it was all a confounded lie—'egad, that's what I told him, and that most of us thought so too, and that was the reason we held our tongues. Well, there's no good repeating all he said, but he was in such a state that I slipped out of the room as soon as he told me he wanted me to come back here and write him all the particulars I could get ; and, 'egad, as the fellow says in the pantomime, 'here we are again !'"

"This is no laughing matter, Billy," said Thorpe, always cautious, warningly; and then he and some of the more sensible betook themselves to their quarters, to talk over the matter in quiet, and try to arrive at something like a reasonable judgment on all that had transpired.

Lieutenant Wrigley was there, taking in all that passed with a greedy rapture that he could hardly conceal; and when the last had been said on the subject he went off to inform the fair Amelia of all he had heard, and the two devoted a pleasant hour to gloating—of course in a truly Christian spirit—over the results of their own deep-dyed malice, which, springing in the first instance from puerile if bitter envy, had grown and grown and grown on what it fed, until now it had developed into a fearful mass of suffering, such as no human being could have imagined would have sprung from the grain of mustard-seed of their puny spite.

Wrigley saw in the whole affair the manifest workings of a Providence who would not permit the righteous to be outraged with impunity,

and Amelia was no less quick in detecting the guiding finger of the Creator in all that had occurred. Yet was their joy tempered with no small suspicion of fear. Revengeful themselves, they dreaded the revenge of Fitzallan—indeed, in a measure, of the Colonel himself—if the origin of the discovery of the truth could be traced to them. The former, on account of manifest causes; the latter because, in their first blunderings, they had mixed up his name, or at least indicated him in a foolish connection with Maggie Smythe; and because, when they arrived at the rights of the story, they had not told him, and thus prevented the culmination of all in so near an approach to a marriage between the chief offender (Captain Fitzallan) and Lady Clara Burton.

“I think it would be wise, Richard,” remarked Mrs Wrigley, whose yellow features were puckered up with an indescribable mixture of satisfied revenge, and of dread of the consequences, after they had well talked the matter over between them, “I think it would be only wise if you, or both of us, were to make a little afternoon call on Dr. Creasey, and see what he has to say about it all.”

"Why, my dear? What can he do?"

"I don't know that he can do anything; but he gave us good advice the last time, don't you remember, after Mr. Paulton's wedding breakfast? And we should be foolish not to keep ourselves on the right side now. It may prevent mischief."

Wrigley rubbed his lean chops with one hand thoughtfully. He had a great respect for the doctor's superior worldly intellect; but he also, for some reason he could not satisfactorily explain to himself, feared the man; and he would rather not apply to him for counsel, if it could be possibly helped. However, he had no tangible argument to oppose to his wife's suggestion, and in the end they got themselves ready and strolled out of the barrack-yard, and took the street leading to Creasey's shady—in more senses than one—domain.

They found him at home, and he looked at them, when they had been introduced into his *sanctum*, with no little curiosity. They had never before honoured him in that manner, and he at once smelt a rat—so he put it to himself. There was a certain fidgettiness about the open-

ing common-places of the worthy couple which he did not fail to notice, but he warily determined to let them introduce the matter themselves, rather than attempt to assist them. Wrigley, somehow or other, *could* not manage to get readily round to the all-absorbing topic, and thus the duty devolved on his wife, the bolder of the two.

She had hardly, in a desultory manner, alluded to the wedding which (as Creasey well knew) was to have come off on that very day, when the doctor's quick mind bounded to the conclusion that something had gone wrong—that all was blown, as he mentally expressed it. Still he let her go on. With many a smirk and smile, and inuendo, and little affectation, did the good creature get at the point of her story; but there was in her green eyes a positive glare of triumph—reflected in those of her spouse as she announced: "And the Colonel found out that all was true—that Captain Fitz-allan was a low-bred adventurer, a rank impostor, just about to marry that poor, dear, unfortunate Lady Clara under false pretences!"

The doctor pretended to whistle out his

astonishment—in reality he had quite expected that something of the sort would occur, if not before the wedding, at least very soon after it. But it was not his game to allow these suspicions to be known, so he dissembled.

“ Why, this is positively dreadful ! ” he cried. “ I quite pity them, so young, so handsome, and so good. But surely, my dear Mrs. Wrigley, the Colonel must have had some idea of the truth before ? Why, it was a matter of common barrack-yard gossip only a few months ago ; surely some one must have hinted the matter to the old chief ? ”

“ No, indeed they did not,” said Wrigley, determinedly ; “ it was not likely they would. Colonel Calverley is by no means a man to be trifled with—neither is Fitzallan, for that matter—and no one dared, in the absence of proof, to repeat to the former what, after all, was then only a rumour. No one dared do it, I say. And you yourself counselled *our* going away just because we had—always anxious for the holy, the eternal truth—happened to discuss the matter only just a very little.”

“ True, true ; but——” The doctor paused, he was not certain of his next move. . .

"The holy and eternal truth," echoed Amelia, at the same time casting her eyes heavenwards in silent testimony of her devotion to the cause of veracity.

"True, I did so advise you," went on the doctor, passing his hand thoughtfully across his broad forehead "and—and it was wise, was it not? You escaped all connection with the affair."

"We did," said Amelia, somewhat drily; "though I for one would have preferred no such escape—rather would I have told that truth before all men."

"And yet a trip to London did not prove amiss?" asked the doctor, in his gayest manner, for he was quite aware of the little deception Mrs. Wrigley had practised on her husband in that matter. But the devout husband looked sour as any green gooseberry at the pleasantries.

"We do not gad about for self-amusement, Dr. Creasey," he said; "however, that has nothing to do with the matter now. What do you think of it all?"

"Well, I've had no time to think of it yet; it seems strange it should come out so tragically,

and at such a time. Sommerton's story can be relied upon, I suppose? He's a feather-headed fellow."

"Taken with the telegram," answered Mrs. Wrigley, "I should say it could be thoroughly relied upon. In fact, there can be no doubt *we* were right, and that this—this Fitzallan (I suppose we must call him still) is not only an impostor, but is so dreadfully—isn't it positively shocking, doctor?—low born, that really, were it not for Christian patience and charity, one would feel quite indignant at having had to associate, even unwittingly, with such a character."

"But worse than that—oh, far, far worse!—is the way in which he has deceived that innocent young creature—that fair and beauteous maiden—"

"Richard, my dear, think of what you are saying!" and Mrs. Wrigley looked volumes of indignation at her husband.

"Ahem! That he should have deceived that—ahem!—that lady—that, in my eyes, is the worst feature in the business. For we cannot rule our own birth; we are, the best of us, but

mud of the earth ; we may be fashioned as delf pots, we may appear as finest porcelain, but oh ! who shall say *we*, ourselves, have any act or part in what is the work of the hand of the Creator ? And then, when we consider, my dearest Amelia, and doctor——”

How much longer the devout man would have prosed on—he was evidently getting into the swing as well as the meeting-house sing-song of a regular “ discourse ”—will never be known, for the doctor had at last determined on his course of action, and interrupted the speaker with an abrupt question.

“ Well, but what are you going to do ? ”

“ Do I ? ” cried the pair, in astonishment at the suddenness of the doctor’s interruption ; “ what have we to do in the affair ? ”

“ Well, I should think—pardon me if I err—you had everything to do with it. It was you that ferreted the story out first from Maggie Smythe, and Mrs. Birt, and Mr. Cupper, and all the rest of it. Why, I should say you are just the people that have *everything* to do with it ; and,” he went on, with the blandest of commonplace smiles, absolutely devoid of definite ex-

pression—"and surely Captain Fitzallan, when he returns, will look to you for some sort of explanation of your—well, intervention in his affairs!"

Lieutenant Wrigley's natural sallowness of expression turned to a horrible whitey-greenness as this view of the case was presented to his mind; Amelia set up her back-bone, and glared at the doctor as though, there and then, Christian or no Christian, she would like to destroy him body and soul.

"Well, but won't he—naturally?" went on the doctor, in reply to these mute demonstrations of surprise and indignation. "No one would have been a bit the wiser but for you; and you may be pretty sure, now that all has come out, he will spare no pains or expense to find out who first fired this mine, which has blown his hopes into fragments."

"Good gracious, doctor! you don't really think that!" cried Amelia, her courage beginning to desert her.

Her husband sat grimly in his chair, the very picture of cowering dread of a danger he had not at all prepared for.

"I do," was the slow reply; "it's not likely he'll pass such a blow over in silence; and an action for libel is a most serious thing to encounter."

"But it's no libel!" chorussed the two, whose thoughts nearly always ran in parallel grooves; "it is true, absolutely true—as you well know, doctor."

"I *don't* know it," was the dry answer; "in fact, I think it's all a mistake!"

"Good heavens!" cried Amelia, "are you mad?"

"No, I'm not. Besides, even if it be true—and mind, I say *if* emphatically—*if* it be true, so much the worse. I believe the law holds that 'the greater the truth, the greater the libel.' In fact, it's a very grave business, and you had better consult your safety. That's my advice."

"But how? What can we do?" asked Wrigley, now seriously alarmed; he knew nothing of the law, but had of it a most wholesome dread.

"That's more than I can tell you. I'm no lawyer, nor do I, indeed, much believe in lawyers. But it's certain you ought not to be here when Captain Fitzallan comes back. An action is,

perhaps, the last thing he would think of. Can't you get leave, or go sick, or exchange? By Jupiter! I tell you what it is, Wrigley—I'd sooner sell out than stay and face him!"

"Sell out! Do you know what you're saying, doctor? Why——"

While Creasey had been speaking, he was fidgetting about the mantelpiece, and had succeeded in giving unobserved a signal that was well understood in his strange household. A servant-girl came bustling in while Wrigley was just beginning to speak, and informed the doctor, with every appearance of urgency, that he was wanted immediately in the consulting-room.

"You will excuse me, I know," he said to Mrs. Wrigley; "it is an appointment that will occupy me an hour or so. I can see you afterwards—though, by-the-by, I don't know when, as I am going out of town. Good-bye, my dear Mrs. Wrigley—good-bye, Wrigley—just take a fool's advice, and 'make yourself scarce,' as the cads say. Now I must run away. Mary, show Mrs. Wrigley out," and he hastened off, while the two stared at one another in blank

dismay. There was, however, no help for it, so they took their departure under the guidance of the servant-girl. Just before the door was closed on them, something prompted Mrs. Wrigley to look quickly back, and, to her unbounded astonishment, she saw, peering at her from the quarter-opened door of one of the side-rooms of the hall, the unmistakeable features of Maggie Smythe.

It so happened that that very evening Maria Paulton, *née* Wyatt, was giving one of those social reunions—they could hardly otherwise be described—for which she was becoming famous in Chorlbury and the neighbourhood. They were not balls, neither were they those stiff abominations called evening parties; but they were pleasant gatherings, of a superior order of merit, at least, in the eyes of Chorlbury, and people sought invitations with considerable eagerness. There were ice-and-champagne-cup refreshments, followed, towards the small hours, with more substantial fare in the form of an elegant supper. There were two or three whist-tables for the old gentlemen, and old ladies

too ; while Jack Paulton occasionally started a little gambling of a more exciting nature for the young bloods of the town, and a few fellows of the mess, who, if they rather despised the aforesaid bloods, had no feeling whatsoever beyond profound respect for their money—a respect that led them to desire the transfer of as much of it as was possible to their own pockets. The regimental ladies did not, as before explained, consider it consistent with their dignity to associate with “the factory girl,” as they were still pleased to call Jack Paulton’s wife ; but it is a question whether their conduct would not have been different when first she returned from her wedding-trip, had they anticipated the extent to which she was about to indulge in hospitality. We know that all women are rakes at heart, and the *dictum* may be fairly supplemented with the fact that the daughters of a regiment do not by any means, as a rule, keep their love for dissipation confined within that portion of their stays where the chief organ of life is situated. Rather do they indulge in “raking” with the most barefaced satisfaction, while some of them

seem never to be satisfied with any amount of it. The disappointment, therefore, to the female "Eagles" was bitter, even if wholesome; nor was it any the sweeter for having to be kept carefully concealed from all save themselves. Mrs. Wrigley and two others were, perhaps, the exceptions that prove the rule; but, however that may be, the first-named lady at least was a constant guest of the Paultons, and, indeed, as young Thorpe carefully calculated, ate more suppers and drank more champagne at the expense of the newly-married pair than did any other human being in the world.

But if the ladies of the regiment hung back, or rather, after the first refusals, were no longer bidden to these "feasts of reason" without much "flow of soul," the Chorlbury matrons and damsels were by no means so reticent, and indeed, "cadged" for invitations in the most bare-faced way. Clan Wyatt was decidedly looking up in the social scale, and the clansmen and clanswomen were far more eagerly sought after now in Chorlbury than they had ever been before. "Old Nick," who keenly appreciated his added dignity in being the father-in-law of

a “real swell,” swore at and bullied his clerks and the inferior populace, ten times as much as he had ever done before; but he struck a balance, we must presume, by an equal increase of toadying servility to the “nobs,” and it was really beautiful to see the manner in which he placed his house, his gardens, his horses, his carriages, his everything, in fact, at the feet of the officers, or of such people of good family with whom his barrack or mess intimacies made him acquainted. He had always been an atrocious and despicable snob, he was a hundred-fold more so now; but there can be no doubt that all the while he looked upon himself as a sort of paragon of gentility, good-breeding, and general suavity.

Anne was content with a humbler position, and having got Maria off her hands to everyone’s satisfaction, would have been glad to remain in her former sphere at Bellevue, if her husband would have let her. Still she enjoyed her daughter’s parties in her own way, the more especially as she found many of her old gossips pretty constantly at them, and was therefore enabled to indulge freely in that domestic scan-

dal without which, it would appear, the domestic life of middle-class England would be misery pure and simple.

But it must not be supposed that whist and scandal were the only, or even the main features in the programme. There was always excellent music, professional as well as amateur ; drawing-room performances of all kinds ; pictures, statuettes, new books, photographs, &c. to be examined ; while the dancing-room found its waxed floor seldom at peace. People came when they liked, went when they liked, and did what they liked, seeking to please no one but themselves ; and it is but a just tribute to Maria's aptitude and tact to say that during her wedding-trip she had picked up, almost in perfection, that happy method of entertaining company so as to put everyone at his ease, which is exceedingly rare in England except in the very highest circles. Her parties were "receptions," in an excellent sense of the term ; and they would not have absolutely disgraced a Parisian hostess--which is saying a good deal in favour of the quondam "factory-girl."

The rooms were very well filled, more so, perhaps, than usual, and the buzz of conversa-

tion was eager and hot. "The Eagles" knew that there was not the slightest use in trying to keep the "Fitzallan affair," as it had even already come to be designated, any longer a regimental secret, and they had determined to be perfectly free about the whole business to outsiders, and, indeed, to pooh-pooh it as a matter that had nothing to do with *them*, the principal parties, with the exception of the Chief, being strangers to the corps until quite lately. By that they meant Fitzallan and Lady Clara Burton; though why they should have looked upon the latter unfortunate girl as one of the culprits—for of course it was culpable to occasion such a regimental scandal—was a thing not easily to be explained. Thus there was a fine dish of gossip for the Chorley people when they assembled, and Maria Paulton had quite a crowd round her while she told the tale, with some little spice of that malice which she entertained in regard to the Colonel alone.

"Old Nick" expressed a desire to lose his soul for ever—even "in company" the fiery little old jockey could not refrain from swearing—if the whole thing did not serve

stuck-up people—by that he meant not only Lady Clara and the Colonel, but also Fitzallan, with whom he could never get on—right, to be found out that way, and to have a jolly good blow-up, that he did; and he would, by Jove! say it to their faces if they were there, that he would, for snobs as they were! And he fumed off to another room, to retail the whole story to one of his trading friends.

Maria smiled, while her eye followed the fidgetty motions of her parent, as he fussed away with the tale boiling over within him.

“Papa’s such a strange man, isn’t he, Mr. Somerton?”

“Egad, he is, and no mistake!” blurted out that most incautious young officer, screwing a rimless glass in his eye to have a better view of “Old Nick.” “Most excitable party, eh, Mrs. Wy—Jove! beg pardon—Mrs. Paulton.”

“Why, you don’t seem quite sure about my name even yet, Mr. Somerton!” with a half-sneer.

She did not care to have her father so spoken of by the noodle she had foolishly asked for an opinion on the subject. She knew that to be

openly caught in a breach of good manners would be a tolerably smart punishment, if he could only see it, for such a man as Somerton.

"Eh? ah! Beg pardon, I'm sure—really—must apologise, Mrs. Paulton; but seeing—eh—your father, just for a moment his name came to my tongue—eh?"

He dropped the eye-glass into his open hand, and looked straight at her, the picture of foolish vacuity. But it was never her policy, now, to be severe on anyone; so Mrs. Paulton laughed good-humouredly, told him she really did not care what he said; and then gave him her arm for a stroll into the dancing-room, where she deposited him in charge of a blond damsel dying to be married to *some one*, and quite willing to conduct Billy Somerton, or any other man, to the hymeneal altar on the shortest possible notice.

The Chorlburians discussed the case of Lady Clara and Fitzallan from every possible point of view, but they could by no means arrive at a satisfactory general conclusion. Some of them —those who mostly affected high life, *ton*, and all the rest of the stuff—professed to be terribly

shocked at Fitzallan's conduct, and wondered if the Colonel—they were still very innocent about these matters—would call him out and shoot him for the insult he had passed upon his niece. As to Lady Clara, they expressed their grief that her name should have been mixed up with that of such a fellow, but joy that she had escaped from his clutches, so narrowly though it had been.

Another party, these the rougher diamonds, both male and female, sided with "Old Nick," in rejoicing over the discomfiture of "stuck-up snobs," and vigorously denounced the Colonel, the Captain, and the lady, in language that was by no means to be described as measured. They held that the Colonel was an old fool, who had been rightly punished for his superciliousness towards themselves and mankind in general; they scornfully laughed at the justice, in their estimation, which had at last overtaken a vain and silly flirt like Lady Clara; and they said at the same time, in so many words, that Captain Fitzallan ought to be kicked out of the Service, tried, and transported, as an impostor, giving himself airs and graces over

people that were in every respect his betters.

There was yet a third body, perhaps numerically the strongest, who regarded the matter solely and entirely from a business point of view. They could not, they said, for the life of them see what was wrong. What did it matter who or what the Captain was, as long as he had the “dibs?” If he had pretended he had lots of money, and then it was found out that he had none, it would have been a very different pair of boots; but he had his fortune at his back, an immense fortune, they were told; and what more could the old Colonel, or the girl herself, possibly want? As for objections being taken to his birth, they thought it stupid nonsense, and pertinently asked: Were we not all descended from Adam? The blow-up, as they called it, at Dumore Castle, they treated very lightly; they boldly said it was all moonshine, mere pretence, to keep up the Colonel’s dignity; and they felt satisfied that, in the course of a month or two, all differences, if there ever had been any real ones, would be healed, and the wedding would come off just as if nothing had happened.

"Don't you think so, ma'am?" asked a rough old manufacturer, who had just demonstrated the latter proposition to his own entire satisfaction, turning to where Amelia Wrigley was sitting listening with eager ears to the whole discussion.

"I cannot at all agree with you," she replied. "It is not very likely that the Colonel, or even Lady Clara herself, would ever listen to the man again. What we know is bad enough; but, after such an *exposé*, how can we tell what more may be in the background?"

"Amelia, my dear," broke in her husband, who had heard her words with great alarm, for the terrors excited by Creasey that afternoon had increased rather than diminished, "Amelia, I think you are over-heating yourself. Had you not better come with me into the card-room for a while?" And he treated her to a furious look, which even he, good Christian as he was, kept in store for the benefit of his help-mate.

The wife, though possessed of decidedly combative qualities as a rule, felt that, on this occasion at least, prudence would be the better

part of valour: and though she returned the look, not without interest either, she submitted with something of outward grace, and was marched off under a salute of titters from one or two vulgar girls, who quite appreciated and indeed enjoyed the little scene between the two disciples.

The result of it all was that, by noon the next day, the whole of Chorlbury was in full possession of the facts of the postponed marriage, and had Captain Fitzallan then put in an appearance at the head-quarters of his regiment, there would not have been a small street-boy encountering him but would have enjoyed a “chaff” and a laugh at the disappointed bridegroom. There is no place in the world for gossip like a medium-sized inland town of England, and most assuredly Chorlbury was by no means behind its neighbours in that respect.

“After all, I’m sorry for the poor fellow,” said Maria Wyatt that night, when the last guest had departed, and she was yawning on a couch, too lazy and too tired to go to bed. “It must be an awful blow to him—such a disappointment—so dreadful too !”

"He shouldn't have counted his chickens before they were hatched, you see," chuckled out the great Jack, turning round from the mirror in which he had been critically examining his features. "I always thought there was something fishy about the man—seemed to talk like a chap that never had a grandfather."

"But do you really—really and truly—believe that it's quite as bad as Mr. Somerton made out in the mess-room to-day, as you told me?"

"Jove! I don't know what to say. Billy's not much of an authority, but he couldn't go and *invent* a yarn of that sort; hasn't the brains. Fact is, I don't think any of them have quite got hold of the right end of the stick yet; the whole job seems an awful muddle. But it's certain there must be more truth than lies in it, and that's a thing one can't often say, d'ye see, Maria?"

She yawned out some sort of an answer that was not very comprehensible, and then the two betook themselves upstairs, rather wondering if, after all, these parties they were so constant-

ly giving were not weary, dreary, and unprofitable mistakes.

In this world we cannot always keep the steam at high-pressure, and not unfrequently it escapes, just at the very moment when we seem to want to use it most. There is no time when we feel so low and dispirited as after we have just been indulging in pleasurable excitement; nor were Jack and Maria Paulton at all different, in that respect, at least, from the rest of man and womankind.

## CHAPTER III.

"LEG-BAIL, BY ALL THE POWERS!"

IT was a sweltering hot day, the hottest there had been during the whole of that month of July, now rapidly drawing to a close, and Maggie Smythe suffered no little from the high temperature. A fleshy, full-blooded woman, who paid but the smallest possible attention to the requirements of health, she was seldom "in condition," and an extra mile's walk in the sun, an extra pint of ale, or a slight over-indulgence in her favourite stimulant, rum, very soon knocked her up.

She had been down in Chorlbury marketing—that is to say doing a remarkably small share of business to a very large proportion of gossip and tipple. She went from shop to shop, giving such orders as were needful for the due carrying on of the commissariat at "The Pines," but she

burdened herself with nothing at all, rightly concluding that it would be far wiser—so far as she individually was concerned—to send in a donkey-cart in the cool of the evening for her purchases, than to carry them herself. At all the places she stopped at she had a goodly talk with the owner or his “missus”; at most of them she allowed herself to be persuaded to “just wet her lips with a friendly glass;” but in the cases where such a hospitality had not been offered, she found that her sinking frame demanded the needful stimulant at the nearest inn or house of call. So by the time her list of things required was exhausted, the good lady found herself in a pleasant, nay, a jovial humour, and she thought she would just step down to see her old friend, Dr. Creasey, and enjoy with him a cool glass and an interesting chat over things past, present, and future.

Of late she had been on very familiar terms indeed with the doctor, and considered herself as quite his confidant in all matters of importance—whether she was or not, remains to be seen. They had always been friendly for years and years past, off and on, and had known

considerably more about one another's history than the outside world knew of either of them ; but from shortly after the time when Mrs. Wyatt gave her party at Bellevue, described at a very early period in this chronicle, their intimacy had grown closer and closer, owing to the necessity forced upon the doctor of taking at least into his partial confidence the mother of the man against whom, or whose purse rather, he was so elaborately plotting—for plotting it undoubtedly was, as there was, evidently, no necessity whatever for his hunting up all the unhappy circumstances of Fitzallan's wretched birth, save and except to extort money from him by way of a bribe to keep the truth concealed. But cunning not unfrequently is met and defeated by cunning it little suspects ; and in this case Dr. Creasey, perfectly certain that he had Maggie Smythe just sufficiently acquainted with the facts for his own purposes alone, was by no means the sole depository of the secret he had wormed out when once the malice of the Wrigleys had given him the lead. Coarse and rough, and low and vulgar, and loose and vicious as Maggie

Smythe was, at the same time she was no mean adept at putting two and two together ; so that while Creasey regarded her as more or less of a dupe and tool—useful for the present, but only fit to be thrown away when done with—she took considerable pains to make herself, as far as practicable, mistress of the doctor's plans. She succeeded, owing to the position she held in his household, unattached though it was, to an extent he could not even suspect. Clever, however, as Maggie undoubtedly was under good guidance, she not unfrequently caused the doctor to tremble for the success of his schemes, and that effect was produced by her tendency to fits of wild rage, arising from what she chose to fancy was wrong done her. The doctor knew he could trust her, even when she was three parts tipsy, so long as nothing occurred to rouse her passion ; but he also knew well that, like most women of her class, she became little better than frantic when anything happened to fire her ungovernable temper ; and that, when in such a state, there was no calculating on what she might do or say. Not often had he seen her that way, it was true ; but he certainly had

experienced more than one of the furious storms of anger which raged over her when she imagined she had been badly treated, and consequently he was quite well aware that he was, morally speaking, treading on a volcano that might never break out in his lifetime, but might, on the other hand, explode at any moment.

To say the truth, the doctor's present course was surrounded with very serious difficulties which the money he had managed to get hold of would not entirely smooth away, and there were rocks, whirlpools, and dangers of all kinds to be guarded against, if possible. In fact, he knew he *could not* protect himself against them all, do what he would, and taking a leaf (as most fellows of his stamp are very apt to do) out of Esther Wyatt's book, he unconsciously resigned himself to the decrees of Fate, or, as he more roughly put it, "took his chance, and d——d the expense!"

Maggie Smythe, then, made her way down to the principal entrance, not the dark one Fitzallan had been admitted by during his melancholy visits, and walked into the house, the moment the door was opened, with the air of a mistress.

"The doctor's in, I suppose, Mary?" she asked the girl who had opened the door.

"No, ma'am, he's not." Maggie was, by Creasey's special orders, always addressed as "ma'am" in that household.

"Well, never mind, Mary. I'll jest sit down in the study a bit till he's back; me walk's tired me." And she passed across the hall towards the door of his *sanctum*.

"But, ma'am—Mrs. Smythe, ma'am," called the girl after her.

"Yes; what is it now?"

"He's not in town at all."

"Not in town!"

By that time they were in the study, and the housekeeper from The Pines flung herself on a sofa, fanning her face with a damp pocket-handkerchief.

"No, ma'am. Didn't you get his letter?"

"Letter!—what letter? You don't mean to say he's gone away anywhere?"

"Yes, he is. He went the day before yesterday, and I know he sent you a letter first, for I saw him direct it."

"Did ye see him post it, ye baby-faced fool?" cried out the other, in some heat. She thought

she was being regularly humbugged, as she mentally called it, for she had seen him on the very day named, and he had not then said anything about taking a journey, though he had had plenty of time to tell her if he had liked.

"No, ma'am, I didn't. At first he told me to post it; then he said he'd do it himself, on his way to the train."

Maggie cocked her ears at that piece of information. Now, she knew, she could readily tell if he really was deceiving her or not.

"Did he get a letter, or a telegraph, or anything, after I left?"

"No, indeed he didn't, ma'am. At least, not that I know of, and I was about all the time, I think."

"An' what train was he off by?"

"Be the four, ma'am."

It was as much as Maggie could do to hold down her mounting rage; it was only a quarter after three, on the same day, that she had left him; but she asked,

"An' who packed his portmancy?"

"Oh! law, ma'am, there's nothing to be so scared about, he——"

"I'm not scared, girl, as you call it. But you just answer my questions, or perhaps it won't be well for you!"

There was stern vigour in the threat, and the servant-girl fairly quailed under the furious glance that was cast at her.

"He didn't take his usual portmanteau, ma'am. He had three new ones in that morning, and he packed them with his own hands——"

"When, girl, when, I say?" She bounced up from the couch, and stamped in fury on the ground as she put the question.

"The first thing after breakfast."

"An' he said nothin' to me of this journey. There's some of his villainy here, I know; an' me name's not Maggie Smythe if I'm not even with him."

She spoke very fast, and it was easy to see she was working herself up into a violent rage. All the tokens of it were already in her features, and she was stamping up and down the room, twisting, until its ribs cracked again, the sun-shade she carried in her hands.

"But he wrote to you, ma'am, I know," the maid ventured to put in.

"Wrote to me! Where's the letter? I never got it, an' if I did it wouldn't mend matters, for why didn't he *tell* me, an' I sitting here for hours with him? Answer me that, will ye?"

Her voice was raised almost to a scream as she put the question, and her countenance was distorted with vengeful feelings.

"Perhaps it was delayed in the post, ma'am, and is waiting for you at home now," suggested the girl, who was beginning to be very much frightened, and to wish that this woman, whom she "never could a-bear," would take herself off the premises.

"Perhaps it is, an' *perhaps* it isn't," was Maggie Smythe's grim response; "but I'll give him a chance, an' go home and see. Let me have a glass of brandy, Mary; I'm faint wid all this talking, an' put out besides."

The girl got the bottle and a glass. Mrs. Smythe swallowed down two measures in place of the one she had asked for, and then she put a final question.

"When did he say he'd be back?"

"He said he couldn't tell, and that we were to go on just as usual until we heard from him."

"Leg-bail, by all the powers!" cried out the enraged Maggie, now pretty certain that the doctor had fled for good and all,—"Leg-bail; an' ye'll never see him here again."

The girl looked perfectly bewildered with the turn things had taken, nor could she understand what the other meant, or was driving at.

Maggie Smythe swallowed another glass of brandy, pouring it down her throat as if it were pure water; and then, without another outspoken word, she went away, muttering to herself:

"I'll give him the one chance—just the one chance of that letter being real—but if it isn't, heaven help him when I catch him!"

Then she strode up the street with her hands clenched, her teeth set, her blood in a gallop of fury, and her eyes wild, restless, and reckless, with the fevered passion that was burning within her. Nor did she give herself any opportunity of becoming calmer, for she went straight to one of her well-known haunts, and there, brooding over the imagined wrong that the doctor had done her in withholding his confidence about this mysterious and sudden departure for unknown parts, she consumed glass

after glass of fiery stuff that, at last, had the blessed effect of sending her off to sleep.

When she woke up it was getting dusk ; so, with a fresh glass or two, just to stir up the liquor already beginning to die within her, she thought it would be only wise to have a fly out to Blaydon (of course at her mistress's expense), and she arrived at The Pines when dark was setting in, with all her former passion against Creasey revived and intensified with the revival and intensity of the horrid stuff she had most recently been consuming.

She asked her deputy, a country wench of abnormal denseness of intellect, if any letter had come for her during the time she had been out. No, none ; the postman who delivered the Blaydon evening letters had not called at The Pines at all. Had any come for her in the morning, or on the previous day ? No, the girl knew of none. And then, having first ordered the wondering creature off to bed, Maggie Smythe pulled herself together as well as her half-t tipsy state would allow, and made her way for the old-fashioned parlour, or boudoir, where she knew her mistress would be sitting.

Esther Wyatt had been lying down on the sofa (since her last sharp agony of mind and body she had found herself inclined to rest a good deal), when the wheels of Maggie's fly had rattled on the gravel sweep in front of The Pines ; but the sound roused her at once from her lethargy, and she was sitting bolt upright in a stiff, old-fashioned arm-chair, reading one of her favourite books, and prepared for the entrance of her life-long servant, no matter what temper or state the latter might be in. Miss Wyatt was paler a good deal—a more corpse-like paleness—than she had been at the commencement of the year, and the lines in her face were deeper-cut and more rigid. The lustrous black eyes seemed, too, more heavy and more languid ; but there was a latent fire in them, ready to burst forth into flame on provocation. The streaks of iron-grey over the ears were broader, deeper, and more pronounced ; and the whole effect was just what might have been expected had the observer known that the stern, cold woman before him had passed through a sustained mental agony that was, in some respects, not far removed from insanity,

and was certainly more telling on the physique of the patient than the decided form of the malady often is. Not that Esther Wyatt was, or had been, "mad." There were few stronger-minded women, in the proper acceptation of the term, in the world; but that very strength itself was abnormal. Her mental constitution was not healthy; and so far she both was, and had been, insane, in the literal meaning of the word. She was not possessed of the *mens sana*, any more than of the *corpus sanum*, but neither was she mad.

Maggie gave a knock, that had a good deal of meaning in it, at the door. It was half defiant, half submissive, wholly improper, and Esther could at once tell, from it alone, not to speak of the lateness of the hour, that Maggie Smythe had probably been at her old tricks again. She made herself stiffer and sterner than ever in her chair, before she uttered the usual "Come in!" And when the housekeeper entered she was greeted with a stony stare which she did not at all relish. In fact, she was, *pro tem.*, at least, abashed, and she did not know

how to open the conversation. At last she bobbed a curtsey, and said,

"I've kem in, ma'am."

"So I see, Maggie Smythe, and late, too."

"I was kep' in town, ma'am. Them tradesmen worrits an' annoys one so, there's no doing nothing with them. An', besides that, I had to get a little something for meself, ma'am."

"A good deal of *something*, if that is the new word for spirits, I'd say. Why, you smell of them enough to poison the whole room. How dare you come home in such a state, and at such an hour—more like a beast than a respectable woman; how dare you?"

And the great eyes flashed, and the marble form took warmth and passion from the soul within, and Esther, for a moment, bent down all opposition in the breast of her drink-inflated housekeeper. But such submission was only very brief indeed in its duration; and, as Maggie would have said herself, if telling the tale to another, her "sperrit soon riz agen the old gal's puttin's on, an' she jest gave her a piece of her mind, along with a bit of news that she had hot an' warm for her ladyship, jest by

way of revenge on her nastiness of temper."

"I dunno, ma'am, ef I'm a greater beast than other folk, an' I dunno why you need call me so. Ef I was kep', I was kep', on your business as much as me own, for Lord knows all I went for meself was down to Creaksey's for a drop of some medicine for me stomach, for it's out of order—an' that's jest about the whole of it."

She leant hard against the back of a chair for support while she so energetically delivered herself, but there was a certain looseness of motion below the knees which argued the potency of the draughts that had been imbibed.

Esther took it all in at a glance, as well as the ugly look in the woman's face as if she had something unpleasant to communicate, and meant to say it out. It was not Miss Wyatt's habit to shrink from pain at the first blush, and she determined to have Maggie's real meaning out of her before the night grew much older.

"I don't want to bandy words with you, Maggie Smythe. Sit down on that chair, and say—what you've got to say, right out."

"I dunno as I've anything particular to say,

ma'am ; on'y you twitted me about being late ; an' you make me out drunk, when it's on'y the sun that's touching me up a piece ; an' I stepped down, as I told ye, to Creasey's——”

“ Maggie, I've warned you before I'll not have you calling gentlemen out of their proper titles. “ Say ‘ Doctor ’ Creasey, if you please.”

The woman uttered a harsh, rude laugh, as she sat down.

“ Why should I ‘ Doctor ’ him or ‘ Mister ’ him ? He's no better than me, that he's not, an' between you and I and the post, Miss Wyatt, he's as big a scoundrel as there is in the country, that's what Dr. Creasey is, an' well ye know it.”

Esther moved her chair, as though the light from the lamp hurt her eyes, and in doing so contrived that the glare of its fulness should fall on her servant, while she herself remained in the shade. In the act she spoke.

“ What I know is nothing to you. Whatever he is, he is also sometimes a guest at this house, and, as such, I choose that he shall be treated with respect.”

“ Ye wouldn't treat him with much respect ef ye knew all of him *I* know. Why, when I

went there this evening, me shaver was gone ! gone without sound or beat, an' without as much as leaving a message or a note. Ah !" she broke off abruptly, and a look of cunning suspicion developed itself on her face—"ah ! perhaps a note did come for me here, eh, ma'am ?"

" Nothing has come, that I've heard of, Maggie Smythe." Then Esther paused for a moment—there was something in all this she did not like—and went on : " And may I ask *why* Dr. Creasey should leave either a message or a note for *you*?"

" *Why?* Wasn't I with him an hour before he started ? an' didn't he never let on he was goin' ? an' hadn't he promised me—swore it with an awful oath—that he'd tell me all about that young rip of a Fitzallan, wid his marriage broke off, an' his girl cryin' her eyes blind, an' old Calverley cursin' an' roarin' his soul out all over the place like a mad bull—didn't he tell me all about this ? An' then he goes an' sneaks off like a hound, without never a word nor a line."

The woman might have been drunk, certainly,

but there was a strange method about it, as though all that she had just uttered had been for some time preparing in her mind, and was now allowed to escape with a purpose. She could not well see Esther's face, but, had she been able to do so, the sight would have surely satisfied even her feelings of petty and momentary revenge on a mistress who had always been kind to her. But she wanted to serve out Creasey as well, and thus there was a fine opportunity of killing two birds with one stone.

Miss Wyatt seemed to shiver all over, as though she had received a sudden chill or stroke which bent her forward a little; but in a second it passed off, and then she spoke in her natural manner.

"I don't think you quite know what you are talking about. Had you not better go to bed? I will ask you to-morrow about Dr. Creasey, for I insist on your treating him as you would treat any other gentleman."

Esther, in her seclusion, had long ago heard rumours of a flirtation between Captain Fitz-allan and Lady Clara Burton, but she paid so little heed to such things that it was seldom

the members of her brothers' families—whom, indeed, she now but very rarely saw—entertained her with gossip ; and she really knew nothing of the tale which was just at present being thoroughly discussed at every tea-fight or muffin-struggle in Chorlbury. But Maggie had no idea of stirring until she had effected her purpose, and the hint that she was too drunk to know what she was saying drove her half wild.

“ Gentleman, indeed !” she snorted out : “ a pretty gentleman ! First he goes an’ robs the young fellow, then he goes an’ stops his weddin’ a beautiful real live lady, an’ then he bolts with the swag, just like any common thief ! ”

“ Maggie Smythe ! ” cried Esther, while the eyes flashed out fire from the dimness of the shade in which they were concealed : “ Maggie Smythe, let there be no more of this nonsensical trifling. What do you mean by ‘ robbing a young gentleman ’ ? Whom did he rob ? And what’s all this about a wedding, and running away ? Tell me at once, and tell me plainly ! ”

Esther was excited over what she had heard, for she suspected more in the background ; and

she could not conceal that excitement even from this half-drunken woman before her.

"He did, ma'am; he robbed Captain Fitzallan. You know, or at least, if you don't, I do;" this with a hideous wink and leer, disgusting to look at, and causing the mistress to shudder with annoyance. "He robbed him of heaps and heaps of money, with frightening the young fellow that he'd let on about his bringing-up, and all that. Surely, ma'am, you must have heard the story the whole barrack-yard's ringing with?"

"I hear no barrack-yard stories, nor stories from anywhere else. You say—I think you said—he *robbed* this—this young officer?"

"Yes, he threatened he'd split, ye know, about his being born no better than he ought to be—law! it makes one laugh, the curiosity of it!—an' sooner than let the yarn go round, this young Fitzallan gives him sacks of money——"

"My God!" ejaculated Esther, leaning back in her chair, as though overcome by some passing thought. She recovered herself almost instantaneously, and with a muttered, "Scoun-

drel indeed, deep-dyed scoundrel, that lives by plunder!" she motioned to the other to go on.

"Well, I wouldn't take on so, ma'am," said Maggie—"it's not worth it; an', after all, what business is it of ours? But never mind that now. He, this Creasey, when he pouches the loot, he just goes on again as bad as ever; and when it comes to marryin' time—you knew the Captain, Fitzallan, was going to marry Lady Clara Burton, didn't ye, ma'am?"

"I did not know it. Go on."

"Well, he *was*, an' the beautifullest couple they would have made—he so fine and handsome and laughin'-like, and she such a darling little lady, with the prettiest little dark face on her you ever saw; the very parson was at the altar, the bells was ringin'—mind, I'm on'y telling you jest the few things old Pinner, that the Captain's dry old stick of a servant, who I see at times, and Parker, the mess-sergeant, could tell *me*—an' he was jest swearing to love, honour, and obey her—as why shouldn't he?—when in comes a telegraph runnin' like mad, put up by Creasey, I think, though I wouldn't let on to any but you, ma'am, what I think of the whole dirty job——"

"Do go on, Maggie Smythe," interrupted Esther feebly, or as one in pain; "I'm tired, and want to get to bed early."

"Well, the telegraph he says, 'I forbid them bands!' and the old Colonel—that old devil of a Colonel *we* knew too well, ma'am—he turns round, and he lets a curse out of him that set Lady Clara a-faintin' as he asks the telegraph what he means. 'I mean what I say,' says he, quite cool-like; 'these bands is forbid, an' it's agin the law for ye to go on with them.' Then there was a terrible row, and old Parker did hear there was a lot of fighting, but in the end of it the telegraph says out plain, 'This man's not the man he is at all; he isn't,' says the telegraph, 'any more Captain Fitzallan than what I am, and ef he'—Good gracious! ma'am, what's the matter?'"

Esther had dropped her head on her right shoulder with a deep, heart-wrung groan, it seemed, and there was no trace of colour whatever in her wasted features. Maggie bounced out of her chair, and ran across the room to raise her mistress, but the very touch of those hands took the same effect as would have had a dash

of iced water from others ; and Esther Wyatt, with a heavy sigh, sat again bolt upright, and looked out straight before her, dimly, indeed, at first, but, after a brief pause, with the old fire and the old decision in the great lustrous eyes. Then she spoke :

“Thanks ; never mind me, Maggie Smythe ; it is nothing, and it will soon pass off—only a faintishness. I’m not very well, and you spoke to me of a man who should be dead to us both. Please do not allude to—to——”

“The Colonel, ma’am ?” asked Maggie, curiously ; she was getting tolerably sober now, and was indeed frightened at the quite novel and unexpected effect her words had produced on one usually so cold and unimpressionable.

“Yes, the Colonel,” was the firm reply. “I don’t choose to hear of him. I will leave this, I think, till the regiment’s gone for ever from Chorlbury. And now you can go ; but stay—you’re sure this tale is true ?”

“Well, I know the most part’s true, for isn’t the whole barrack-yard, an’ the town too, for that matter, talkin’ of it ? But it was jest to get at the real whole of the ins and outs of it,

not old Pinner's bits and scraps, which, in spite of our old friendship, he's loth to tell, that I went to see Creasey, the blaggard ; an' then to find him gone, an' all the money, I bet, with him !"

" You can leave me now, Maggie Smythe," said Esther, in her usual tones ; " I want nothing more to-night. And you needn't mind what I said to you when first you came in—perhaps you were excited about this affair, and I mistook."

" I *was* excited, ma'am, an' well I might be, over the scurvy trick that villain played me, who'd helped him so well——"

" Helped him ?"

" Oh, nothin', but jest a word here and a hint there, never thinking there was no harm in it, an' on'y doing it by way of a bit of a lark."

" You do not know the harm you may have done, Maggie Smythe," was the vehement and emphatic interruption ; " you may have done harm that a whole lifetime could not repair. Now go ; I want to be alone, and you're best in bed."

Maggie could not resist the commands of a voice she had been accustomed to obey more or less readily all her life; so, with a simple "Good night, ma'am," she turned round and walked away to her own realms, considerably more sober than when she had entered The Pines that evening. Her mind was in too confused a state to allow of her coming to a conclusion, one way or the other, on the question of whether or not she had secured a portion of that revenge on Creasey which her passion demanded; but she felt that she had at least, as she expressed it to herself, put a spoke in his wheel that would oust him (as she thought) from the good graces and money of her mistress; while, as for the latter, Maggie really felt sorry that she had apparently hurt her so severely, when she had only at first meant to punish her with a little chaff for detecting herself (Maggie) under the influence of drink.

"It's all along," she muttered to herself, as she descended to make a final jorum of liquor—"it's all along of that old Colonel that she takes on so. It doesn't matter a jackstraw who else is by, or who else is hurt, but just whisper his

name to her, or let her get a glimpse of him if you can, an' there she is, a mad, ravin' idiot, I do verily believe, not fit to be trusted alone. Well, well, I never cared that, one way or another, for any man ; an' glad I am that I can keep meself cool when other women go off in their tantrums, when they jest happen to hear the name only of an old blaggard who jilted them near thirty years ago."

In which self-oration, it will be observed, Mrs. Maggie Smythe no more stuck to the naked truth than she was in the habit of doing when society called her away from those pleasant reveries in which she was wont at times to indulge.

As soon as her housekeeper had left the room, Esther Wyatt rose to her feet, tall, stately, grand, and defiant as an Amazonian queen about to lead her hosts into deadly battle, and she listened until the last sounds of the woman descending the stairs below had died away. Then she went to a secret drawer in her huge walnut writing-case, and took from it a small phial containing a dark, turgid fluid. That she

carefully placed in her bosom, and, making a selection of some half-dozen books, she lit a taper, extinguished the lamp in the boudoir, and went silently and firmly up to her own bedroom. Arrived there, she locked and double-locked the door, lit a large lamp standing on a table convenient to the head of her bed, on which she also placed her books, with a glass, the phial she had brought up, and one or two minor articles. Then she steadily undressed herself—she did not, strong woman in spirit as she was, dare look in the mirror, for she knew the horrible sight of distorted features the act would entail,—and in five minutes, without prayer or the shadow of a prayer, without a thought of God [or the shadow of a thought of God, she was in bed. She took up one of the books, and commenced to read it—that is to say, she tried to commence to read it; but the effect was a hopeless one, and soon, but not until after she had made most strenuous efforts to force concentration of the mental faculties, she abandoned the attempt as one utterly impracticable.

And then came thought, cruel, harassing

thought, of a maddening nature. She could not help thinking of this man who had thrown her over in the heyday of her youth and beauty, and had made her the laughing-stock of all India—so she deemed the truth to be; nor could she keep her mind away from that cursed Creasey, whose sole mission on earth seemed to be nothing but one of injury and ruin to all with whom he came in contact. He had done her all the wrong he could—nay, he was doing her wrong and robbery every hour he lived and took her little money from her; and now he was seeking to rob and ruin this unfortunate young Fitzallan—this young man who should be dearest of the dear to her, for was he not dear to her heir, and the bearer of the name of the best and truest friend she had ever had on earth? Creasey had him, too, in his toils, crushing and pressing him to death and damnation, even as he was crushing and forcing herself to the same awful end. Would it not be a mercy and a blessing if the world could be rid of this monster of cruelty and iniquity? and would not the doer of the deed be deserving of all gratitude and all praise? And this girl—

this beautiful young girl with the lovely sunrise smile, which made all on whom it rested happiest of the happy—was she, too, to be sacrificed at the shrine of the same living demon? Calverley—the fiend Calverley—and this fearfully vicious Creasey—she hungered and thirsted for revenge on them both. Could she not yet have it in a fuller perfection than she had ever hitherto known? For she had tasted of its sweets (true, it was in a poor and pitiful way, and consisted in punishing herself, in the foolish thought that, by doing so, she was laying a rod to *their* backs), and feebly-flavoured as those sweets were, yet had she relished them with an intense relish, and never yet had they palled upon her appetite. And the young pair, the innocent and harmless ones who had been baffled in their loves by those others, could she not take them to her heart of hearts, and cherish and fondle them, even as other women cherished and fondled the desire of their souls? No! A thousand, a hundred thousand million times No! She had cut from her, ages ago, all thoughts of tenderness, of human affection, of natural love; and now she would never—no,

never! not for all creation could offer her, never again would she return to the traps and pitfalls and snares of those vague delusions of diseased minds, which were called affection and love.

And so she raved on the whole night through, lashing herself into fury as she thought of her wrongs, of her sorrows, of her sufferings; and when the cold grey of early dawn came peeping in at that old-fashioned casemented window, it could see nought but the struggling form of a writhing woman, a semblance of a wrecked woman, battling against herself, battling against nature, battling against that God who, for her, said in vain, "Let there be Light."

The daybreak bore stronger and stronger on her eyes, and at last the first beams of a glorious sunrise shone straight in on her, and they roused her to a sort of semi-sense.

"Kismut!" she whispered,—"Fate! it is my fate. Why should I struggle more against it? Let it be as it is; and here is what will bring me rest."

She reached out her hand (alas! how it trembled after that night of unnerving self-con-

test !), grasped the phial of opium, measured herself out a measure, as well as she could, swallowed it, and in five minutes poor stranded and wrecked Esther Wyatt was in a glorious cloud-land of supreme beauty—a floating angel of angels, a blessed spirit, hovering for ever in trackless realms of overwhelming bliss ; and on the bed lay the senseless, broken, helpless shell bearing the name of that same Esther Wyatt.

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE BLOW; ITS CONSEQUENCES.

"COME in, whoever you are," cried Lady Clara Burton gaily, as a timid, half-hesitating knock was made at the door of her sitting-room.

The handle turned very slowly, the entrance almost imperceptibly widened, and Lady Clara, running forward merrily to satisfy her curiosity as to whom her cautious visitor could possibly be, started back in horror and dismay as the contorted and yellow features of the Colonel met her astonished gaze. He was an absolutely changed being since she had seen him last (only an hour or so), and as he strode forward and, with husky voice, told her to be calm, the conviction at once flashed across the girl's mind that something fearful had befallen the man who was to be her husband on the morrow.

She did not scream, she did not faint, she did not even sob; but her right hand clutched her ear and the side of her head convulsively, the left tore violently at the skirt of her dress, her great dark eyes protruded horribly, her mouth was drawn up with an expression of questioning fear, and the blood rushed from her face and to her face like a storm-wave dashing against, and being beaten back from, some wild beach-cliff.

“For heaven’s own dear sake, be calm, Clara ! Clara, my child !” cried the Colonel, almost tottering as he reached her and placed his hand on her left shoulder.

“Tell me !” she gasped out, the words trembling from her white lips in quick, harsh accents,—“quick, tell me ! I shall die with agony—suspense. Oh ! heavens, uncle, is he dead ?”

“No, Clara, no—a thousand times no ! He is well, uninjured ; nothing has happened to him ; upon the word of a living man, nothing !”

“Then what is it, this horrible look in your face ? Mercy, uncle ! mercy, if you would not kill me ! Tell me, what is it ? For the love of heaven, tell !”

She fell on her knees before the old man, her arms grasping his leg, her head flung back in the wildness of her anguish, her soul bursting with the overpowering pain, with the certain knowledge of an unknown ill.

But he could not, strive as he would, break up all in a moment that dream of happiness in which she had revelled only a brief hour ago. He tried, but his voice refused its office, and the words died away in a hoarse rattle in his throat. Then the grandeur of her woman's nature asserted itself. For a second her bitterness of anxiety was unfelt; she rose quickly and led him to a chair, into which he sank quite overcome; and she placed her hands on his head lovingly, and she looked in his eyes with the ineffable sweetness of daughterly love; and she whispered to him, "Not now; you are not fit to tell me, uncle. Rest awhile, and then—"

"And then," he interrupted, in thick, guttural accents—"and then, Clara, I shall ruin your happiness for ever!"

Her heart seemed to stop as the words fell on her ear; she became, as it were, paralysed with

suppressed agony of anticipation; and no one could possibly have said which of the two, the worldly old man or the innocent young girl, was most affected by a blow which one realised to the fullest extent, while the other knew of neither its nature nor its severity. He saw he could not longer delay telling her all, lest her very life should be lost in the fearful efforts she was making to be calm, for his sake; and he took her head and placed it against his heart, and he muttered, rather than spoke:

“He is not—worthy—of you, Clara; he is a dishonoured man!”

She bounded to her feet with a wild, discordant laugh—a horrid laugh of sarcasm and triumph.

“*He* a dishonoured man! Uncle, you must be a raving madman! Pray where have you been, or whom have you spoken to, to learn that madness? Oh, but you nearly killed me with your dreadful words and looks! Henry, *my* Henry, a dishonoured man! Oh! uncle, uncle, you are raving!” And she went off into a loud hysterical laugh, as the revulsion of feeling swept across her soul, unbalancing, for the

moment, even the reasoning faculty of the brain.

The Colonel, who, under the influence of this totally unexpected turn things had taken, was almost distraught, could not at once think coherently of his next move, but, in the face of the difficulty, soon became much more his natural self than he had been when he entered the room to announce the terrible discovery he had made about Captain Fitzallan. He now saw plainly that Lady Clara must be told the truth, fully and circumstantially, at once, or the most serious consequences would ensue; but how to get her to listen quietly to what he had to tell was a problem that no little puzzled him. As long as she continued to laugh at the very first idea of the truth, no progress could be made; and the Colonel sought for means to bring her down from the hysterical state into which his own words and actions had driven her.

“Clara,” he said, after a very brief pause for consideration, “Clara, my child, come and sit down here beside me. For pity’s sake, do, and in mercy to me, do not laugh so at me—pray do not.”

“Laugh at *you*, uncle?” she cried, turning towards him, and resuming somewhat of her normal air: “I was not laughing at *you*, but at the absurd ideas some poor envious fool has been putting into your head—a lady, *I* know; a man would not think of such a spiteful thing.”

“It was not a lady; and, be it spiteful, or envious, or what not, it is better that you should hear the whole story, and then you will be able to judge for yourself.”

“Oh, certainly, if you wish it, uncle,” she replied, with great sprightliness, for she regarded the whole thing now as a piece of nonsense, explainable in the simplest possible manner, and palmed off on her uncle by some designing minx, jealous of the coming happiness of herself, Lady Clara Burton. She went and sat beside him directly, with quite her usual manner, gave him a preliminary kiss by way of encouragement, folded her hands across her in the “good-child” fashion taught her by her governess, and said pleasantly,

“Now for it, uncle; out with the whole terrible tale of the ‘dishonouring’ of Captain Henry Fitzallan, of Her Majesty’s ‘Eagles,’ with the

fatal consequences to Lady Clara Burton—‘full and true account, with pictures of the parties, only one penny!’”

But he did not laugh, as she seemed to half expect, at her sally. He placed one of his hands upon her knee, with the other he clasped hers, and he said,

“Clara, there is nothing to laugh about. It is serious, very serious indeed. You told me only this morning, scarce an hour ago, that you had the fullest confidence in Captain Fitz-allan——”

“And so I have,” she put in, promptly and decisively.

“Do not interrupt me. Let me tell my tale through as well as I can, and then you will be able to say or do what you please. It is now my duty to tell you that that confidence is entirely misplaced, and that I have the fullest and amplest proof that he is, and has been for a long time, deceiving you on a point of vital importance——”

Lady Clara stamped her foot violently on the floor, as though she could not bear to hear even a hint of such a thing; but she controlled her-

self, and allowed him to resume his story.

'Then the Colonel, very cautiously and very wisely, took up the tale so far as he knew it—and it will be recollectcd that he had been kept purposely in complete ignorance of the gossip in the regiment on the subject—or could guess at it, by the light of the Rev. Mr. Burdin's letter, and dealt first with the fact that Fitzallan's property, under the will of the General, as he supposed, was being attacked. Then he went on to examine the grounds on which the young Captain had been held to be truly and really an adopted relation of the testator; and ultimately, with the greatest delicacy and *finesse*, he worked round to the point that Fitzallan had passed himself off as such a relation, even up to the very moment when he and Lady Clara had been last together: that he had fully intended, on the morrow, to marry her under the style and title of such a relation, while all the time he was, and well knew he was, no such relation at all, but a man of ignoble—of low—birth, and quite unfit, in every sense of the word, to even mingle in gentlemanly society.

Lady Clara, as the tale proceeded, grew

paler and yet more pale, and her hand clutched her uncle's with a feverish grip, of such strength as almost to be painful to him. But she said not a word: and only the hard, half-suppressed breathing, the distended eyeballs, the lip severely bitten into by the teeth, and the quivering nostril, told of the cruel agony she was undergoing. And when the Colonel—who had indeed softened down every point as far as possible—made an end of his narration with the statement that Fitzallan, her own heart's darling, and almost already her husband, was of low birth, and unfit even to look at her—when he had reached that point, and paused to indicate he had ended, she opened her clenched lips as though with a violent wrench, and in a croaking, unnatural voice, asked,

“And you say all this—this frightful story is told you in *one* letter?”

“No, it is not, my child. But the letter from the Rev. Mr. Burdin, who baptised—who christened—who—well, who refers to Captain Fitzallan—contains an outline of the facts which bring the whole thing to *my own recollection*.”

Lady Clara gave a tremendous gasp, as

though a violent blow had been struck her, and she pressed her heart fiercely with her disengaged hand. The Colonel looked at her for a second, with a glance of deepest anxiety ; but then he went on, for he saw it was best to be quick and get the whole miserable business over.

“*My own recollection, Clara,*” he repeated, with great firmness and emphasis ; “for though I was hundreds of miles away from my regiment at the time, having been sent away on the staff of the army operating against Dost Mahomed, in the Affghan War of '38, a—well, a friend wrote me an account of the whole painful circumstances attending the birth of the son of a soldier, who was then in the cells, convicted of—well, let that pass—and those circumstances coincide with this letter, and confirm my belief in its correctness.”

There was a cruel, deadly pause, and the girl seemed struck dumb—a silent, senseless statue of fair marble.

“For heaven's sake, speak to me, Clara ; try to speak to me, my darling, darling girl ! Oh ! you will die if you do not speak !”

He rose and shook her with both hands on her shoulders, and it would have nigh broken the heart of any other man to gaze on that terror-stricken, stony face, mute as the face of a corpse. He was frightened beyond measure at the strange result of his words, and he was turning to rush to the bell and summon assistance, when the girl groaned once, twice, three times, a deep, hollow groan ; a large tear filled into either eye, overflowed, and rolled down her cheeks ; and then, he having knelt down, for he thought she was going to fall forwards, her head dropped on the old man's shoulder, and with a loud wail of heart-wrenched despair, she burst into a passion of wild grief, while the tears coursed down her features in irrepressible torrents. She was only a woman, a feeble, silly, loving woman ; and why should she not weep, even as a cottage maiden would have wept under like circumstances ?

There is no need to picture with anything of minuteness the effects of the great sorrow that had dropped with such tremendous suddenness and weight on Lady Clara Burton, nor is it

necessary to particularise the details of the manner by which, when the first outburst of her grief had calmed away, she allowed herself to be convinced that in deed and in truth her lover had grossly deceived her, as he had deceived all, had perjured himself to her with false oaths and false love commingled in the same sentences, and had nearly entrapped her into a life-long union, which could not have produced anything but misery and wretchedness when the horrible deception came, as it *must* have come sooner or later, to be known. Suffice it to say that she gave a silent consent to the immediate stay of the preparations for the wedding on the morrow; that all she prayed for was solitude, complete solitude; and that, having with great difficulty (for so violent was her anguish that they thought her brain would turn) obtained her desire, she locked herself up in her bedroom, and then fought out, with all the cruel strength of her nature, the fierce battle between her mighty love and her mighty sorrow.

The Colonel and the Earl of Dumore, as we have seen, took measures to prevent the ap-

proach of Captain Fitzallan to the Castle ; the guests were dismissed as soon as ever they possibly could be ; and a deadly gloom of disappointment and baffled expectation settled down on those dreary old halls, which had been only so recently stirred up to something of their old gaiety, of their old exuberance of friendly hospitality.

The Earl, as Billy Somerton had truly observed, put himself through a violent course of strong drink, in hopes of lightening the burden of astonishment and dismay which had so unexpectedly put in an appearance, and succeeded to a degree that fairly surprised even those faithful retainers that knew him best, and who also well knew the aptitude he ever displayed for self-indulgence of every description. As for the Colonel, the whole affair brought on a serious attack of gout, which effectually laid him by the heels for many days, and the amount of oaths and imprecations the wretched old sinner sent up to heaven during that period of sharp torture far exceeded anything that his most intimate—well, he had no friends—acquaintance could have even imagined. During that

period of pain Colonel Calverley was quite unable to fix his mind with any degree of success on the question, if such could be said to exist, between Lady Clara Burton and this Captain—Smythe! But when convalescence, followed by recovery, set in, he commenced seriously to think over the whole of the extraordinary circumstances, and to endeavour to arrive at a decision which should at once stop scandal, and keep Lady Clara's name from being mentioned in connection with such a discreditable adventurer as this Captain with the double name.

He regretted now that he had acted so publicly and so hastily, in conjunction with the hot-blooded Dumore, in forbidding Fitzallan (for so it will be more convenient still to call him) the Castle on the day of the *exposé*. He saw now, when it was too late, that he had behaved in a manner highly injudicious in making the story public at all. He should have sent Dumore to Fitzallan to intimate that the match must be broken off, but quietly, and without publicity; and that, to attain such an end, the Captain should betake himself to France, or some secluded part of the Continent, until curiosity

should have died away. Fitzallan, when the letter that had been found was held over his head as a threat, would no doubt have acceded to that course at once; Lady Clara could not possibly have been worse than she was in the actual state of affairs; and the guests, the regiment, and "the world" at large, could have been thrown off the right scent by some ordinary device of civilised society. As it was, some "damned good-natured friend" had, as a mere matter of course, concocted a partially true, partially imaginative account of the abrupt end at which the marriage negotiations had arrived and despatched it to the *Morning Post*, whence it had found its way into the *Times*, and from that into a multitude of journals, metropolitan and local, whose sub-editors were unable to resist the temptation of an "Extraordinary Incident in Fashionable Life. Abrupt Breaking-off of an Aristocratic Match!" In fact, "the whole world and his wife" were by this time in full possession of a tolerably accurate account of the unhappy ending to the wedding programme; and thus an injury was done to Lady Clara Burton, the gravity of

which could hardly be estimated. All this publicity, ever hateful, but a thousand times more so under such peculiar circumstances, had been the result of the Colonel's passionate rashness, and he blamed his own conduct far more severely than he had ever before done in his life.

He was not, however, a man to cry more over spilt milk than could be possibly helped ; and with returning health came deep reflection, and an ardent desire, also a stranger to the Colonel's normal moral constitution, to repair, in so far as he could, the wrong he had done to others, and to—this part of it was not strange—himself, by his foolish haste. First of all, he studied again, with deepest attention, every word of the Rev. Mr. Burdin's letter, which he still retained, reading and re-reading it by the light of his own memories, second-hand though they were, of a case that had excited no little sensation at the time, in his old regiment “The Flashers.”

He had been away with the army storming Ghuzni, as he had told Lady Clara, when the affair took place ; but all the details had

been communicated to him by a somewhat diffusive correspondent. A desperate bad character, "the" bad character of the regiment, had been convicted by Court-martial of a felonious crime, and was undergoing punishment in the cells at Rampoorlee, a sort of subsidiary station to Chuttorah, from which it was divided by a few miles, when his wife—between whom and Calverley himself it was more than suspected discreditable passages had occurred—was confined; and, curiously enough, as the Colonel now remembered, this Chorlbury doctor, Creasey, was the medical man who had attended her. The wife was Maggie Smythe—the same Maggie Smythe at whom Creasey had hinted at "The Eagles'" mess, as mentioned in an early chapter.

Very shortly after her confinement, her precious husband was found one morning dead in his cell; and from that day forward it had ever remained an undecided question whether he had committed suicide, or had come by his death, the circumstances of which were very peculiar, through misadventure, when attempting to escape. The whole station—from which drafts

of men were constantly being sent on to the frontier, troops passing through for the same destination, with all the hurry-scurry of war, and preparation for war—was in a state of the greatest confusion, and things were slurred over and forgotten, or never noticed at all, that in more quiet times would have excited the deepest curiosity and the closest attention. But in spite of it all, as we have seen, the Colonel knew pretty well what was going on, and had special reason, of course, to remember all about the Maggie Smythe affair. Colonel Fitzallan was then acting in command of the station, and being one of the kindest of men, as well as one of the most innocent and unsuspecting, he had—so Calverley's correspondent had written—taken a deep interest in the handsome young woman, rid of a husband in such a horrible manner, and had done far more than anyone could have dreamed of in the interests of both. There was no doubt as to his having sent the boy to school, of having provided for him as a youth, and now, blind that he was not to have thought of it and examined into the case before, it suddenly was borne down to absolute

conviction in Calverley's mind, that this Captain Fitzallan was really and truly none other than the offspring of the Felon !

The Colonel had, of course, never dreamed of such a thing, or he would have taken remarkably good pains to keep the young officer out of his regiment ; and the reason he did not dream of it was, in a great measure, because of his own selfishness and laziness, but more especially the former. It would never, in his wildest moments, have entered into *his* head to show any kindness to an unfortunate, deserted young woman and her infant ; while as to adopting the latter, and finally giving it a fortune and name far beyond the average, why, Calverley would have no doubt whatever as to the insanity of anyone who would do such things. But there, it was all over ; the son of the felon Smythe was the gay Captain Fitzallan of "The Eagles :" was on the point of being the husband of the daughter of an Earl related to Colonel de Courcey Calverley : and the last-named gentleman, as he now saw very plainly, was in a considerable degree responsible for the whole train of events.

What, then, was to be done, to repair, so far as was practicable, and that was but a very small way, the mischief he had occasioned? The match must be formally, as it was already practically, broken off, and that could be accomplished best by a letter to the gentleman who had been so vigorously at work drawing up the settlements on both sides. Then Fitzallan, who probably was quite well entitled to the name by legal process, should be got out of "The Eagles," out of the Army, if possible, with the least delay that could be managed. And finally Lady Clara, for whose agonies the Colonel felt a sharper grief than he had ever felt for any but his own concerns, in the whole course of his life, she must be set right before the world, and then should be taken abroad for a lengthened tour, with the double object of alleviating her profound sorrow and shame, and of causing that blessed forgetfulness of all that had happened in her regard, which so certainly arises in the mind of fashionable society when the object of any story is removed from its gaze. Having decided upon these steps, the Colonel was not long in beginning to take them.

First of all he wrote a neat contradictory or explanatory paragraph for the columns of the *Morning Post*, in which much doubt was thrown on the accuracy of the former account of the sudden breaking-off of the “Marriage in High Life;” all the romantic elements with which it had bristled were flatly denied; and a plain, matter-of-fact explanation of the rupture that had taken place, “solely on account of ordinary family differences,”—a delicate way of hinting that they could not, at the last moment before signature, come to terms as to the settlements —was duly substituted. In fact, the whole of the first story was made to appear as a grossly sensational exaggeration, and many buckets of excessively cold water were thrown upon the “entirely imaginative” paragraph, which had caused “much pain and annoyance to two distinguished families.”

Next the Colonel indited a formal withdrawal from the contract of marriage “for family reasons,” for the benefit of the solicitors on both sides, and procured to the documents the rather drunken signature of Lady Clara’s legal “best friend,” the Earl of Dumore, and he forwarded them by the first post. The Colonel

also wrote to Major Houghton, in temporary command of the regiment, asking that officer to assemble the officers, and prefer to them his (the Colonel's) request that the unfortunate affair might be as little spoken of as possible, within or without the corps. Finally he wrote the stiffest possible note to Captain Fitzallan, barely alluding to what had occurred, but taking it as a matter of course that he knew the whole story of his birth was bruited, and calling upon that officer, as a simple affair of duty, to retire at least from "The Eagles." That letter—not knowing in the least what had become of the bridegroom that was to be—he directed to Mr. Martin, amongst whose papers it lay, unread by the person to whom it was addressed, for many and many a dusty day.

The latest labour of Colonel Calverley, in this connection, was to send off to the Horse Guards an application for three months' leave of absence for himself, "on urgent private affairs and serious ill-health combined;" and, having accomplished these things, he felt considerably relieved, and ceased, in a measure, from the awful torrent of oaths against Fitzallan, against himself, and against all men and things which,

since the catastrophe, had formed the greater portion of his coherent utterances.

And what of Lady Clara? How fared it with that dainty Lady Clara Burton, whose paths, hitherto, had been only in the gardens of life—whose knowledge of the outside rough highways and byways could only be set down as *nil*? She was crushed—completely crushed under the appalling magnitude of the burden of sorrow that had befallen her; and after the first wild agony of an unimagined grief, she seemed to lie down stupefied, petrified, unconscious save of a dull, dead pain that never ceased its gnawing at her heart. Had she ever even conceived the possibility of the blow under which she had fallen, it would not have descended with a hundredth part of the force that had been given it. Had she ever, in the highest flights of her imagination, grasped for a mere second a mental glimpse of the horrors of deception on the part of her lover, that deception, when it became an accomplished, tangible fact, would never have rent her heart in twain, as it now seemed to have done. Had she ever, in

the wildest dreams visiting the pillow of mortal being, seen the shadow of a vision of a perjured man pouring forth unholy vows of loathsome lies, that perjury and those lies would not now be poisoning, befouling, and drying the very fountains of her soul. In a word, had she not surrendered her whole being, her body and her spirit, into the keeping of this man, she would not now be lying grovelling in the dust, under the death-wound he, and he alone, had administered.

Language fails to describe her mental state, her mental torture, her mental desolation and death. Nothing can be added to the simple statement that she was crushed—crushed almost out of existence, and that she lay prostrate, breathing and living indeed so far as the flesh was concerned, but wanting that life of the soul without which all is death. Perhaps it was as well that the effect on her should be so. There is a limit to mental as well as to physical pain which cannot be passed, and men call it unconsciousness. To reach that limit, and still retain the use of the faculties, means that the case is hopeless, and that the unconsciousness

which must come will be that of the tomb or of the asylum. But, in due time, that hapless stage was passed by Lady Clara. Her strong constitution, of mind as of body, re-asserted itself, and she awoke to the fact of an ever-abiding grief, a profound sense of shame, and a bitterness of recollection which lashed her at times into fury. She had been a good girl, in the ordinary acceptation of the term, but she had never been practically religious. She said her prayers : she had had sentimental ideas at one time (as many young girls have) of being a sort of lay nun, and of devoting her life to the care of the poor, of the sick, or of the wounded : but it was not her habit to rely at all upon her God : she did not know Him, save as a distant acquaintance, to be recognised at church on Sundays, and bowed to in the morning and evening, provided there was nothing else to do : and as for looking to Him for personal, paternal light, guidance, and support—why, such things had simply never entered her head. She was but an ordinary girl, in spite of her title, just like millions of other young ladies at the present moment in England ; religion to her, as to

them, was a name, and no more, and in the hour of sorrow, or trial, or danger, her thoughts were each and every one human, and never soared beyond the boundaries of the earth. So came she to view this trouble, and judge it from a human standpoint alone; and so came she, as a natural consequence, to turn grief into rage—to exchange, so far as she could, love into wild tempests of passion, but without in the least degree diminishing that love—and to place in her heart, instead of that sad humility which should there have found place, a mere earthly sense of disgrace, the most intolerable and the most cruelly bitter visitor she had ever yet experienced. She could not, indeed she did not attempt to analyse her feelings. In her present state she became the mere toy, the shuttlecock of her own passions; and she took fits of various emotions, which were both inexplicable and incomprehensible. Her leading sensation, when she recovered from the first crushing deadness, was one of rage at having been deceived. Then came bitter sorrow that her lover had perjured himself to her, and had thus wrecked all their hopes of happiness. Then

came pity for the horrible sufferings such a man must have undergone before he could bring himself to act in the cowardly, underhand way he had acted ; and next a fit of frantic love rushed over her like a whirlwind, and, had it been possible that he could at such times have appeared before her, most assuredly she would have, there and then, gone with him, to follow him to the ends of the earth, and to be his for ever. But it was very seldom she had that sort of fit—the wound was too recent, too deep, and the loss of blood, so to speak, had too much enfeebled the strength of the sufferer ; and, beyond all question, the prevailing feeling of her mind was burning shame, and the agony of a sorrow that was the more keen because it was accompanied with such fearful humiliation. At such times she could not think of him even without horror. It shattered her pride to atoms to dwell on the thought that all her acquaintances and friends knew she had so unreservedly given every throb of her heart to the son of a felon—for by this time the Colonel had told her all—and she asked herself over and over again, Where was that instinct of nobility

which she had so often boasted the well-born inevitably possessed ! And the answer never came, save in the shape of still deeper abasement than any she had yet tasted. She had loved —had ?—she still did and would ever love this man with all the burning love the female heart was capable of, and he had degraded her before all ! She had set him, and herself beside him, on a high pinnacle, as models and exemplars for all other lovers to follow, and lo ! he had dashed them both into the very slime of earth. She had lavished on him every thought, every feeling, every innermost secret of her soul of souls ; and he had called his God to witness the lies he was acting and speaking every moment in her presence !

And then would come to her long, dreary, and wearisome forecastings of the future that lay before them both. She knew—ah ! but she felt it, as part of the breath of her life—that she could never cease to love the glorious dream, passing under the name of Henry Fitzallan, which had lighted up the earlier days of their courtship, had gilded the later period of their love-making, and had shed a halo of inex-

pressible brightness over the still later term of their preparations for the wedding. No, she could never cease to her dying hour to love him, to cherish his memory as part of her very life; to pray for him, as the one only thing that had been to her a happiness supreme; but neither could she ever forget his crime, nor could she forgive it.

And he—this glorious vision of a golden dream of a day gone by for ever—how would *he* come to think and to act when the first shock of discovery was over, and he awoke to the knowledge that all between them was over for ever? Well did she know that he loved her as truly as man ever loved woman—in a mere corporal sense; but well did she, now, also know that in a spiritual sense he was far from her as the poles were asunder. She knew that, now his eyes were open, he would gnash his teeth in despair at the gross degradation he had endeavoured to pass upon her, and had partially succeeded in effecting. She knew that he would weep the most burning tears—tears dragged from a self-mangled heart—to think that he had ever cast himself in her way,

and nurtured a fleshly love, that was false as hell from the very beginning. For he must know that there could have been, from the very first, nothing ethereal, nothing whatever spiritual about it—on his side, at least; and she thought that that knowledge would sink him into the depths of a black despair that nothing could lighten, nothing alleviate. Love her he did, and love her he would, but it was the love of the animal, not the pure, truthful, innocent, undesigning love of the spirit, else how could he have so deceived her! Great as was her family pride, lofty as were her ideas on the subject of old blood and gentle descent, deep as was her hatred of the mingling of the high-born with the low-born in wedlock, she thought now that if at the outset he had told her all, had openly said who he was, had but hinted at the truth regarding himself and his belongings, she could not have helped loving him all the same, and sinking everyone of those inborn prejudices in an affection she could not resist for even the son of a—felon!

It was a terrible word, and it cut her to the very soul even to think it, without her lips form-

ing the hated sound. And then a quick revulsion of feeling would come over her, sweeping away everything but the stern pride of family which sat enthroned within her bosom, and she would rise up in the fierceness of her wrath, and pray Heaven to be freed from even a further thought of the perjured man who had sought to do her a deadly wrong.

So the battle went on, and it left its marks plainly and unmistakably on a frame sensitive to an exquisite degree. In the first days the Colonel, in accordance with her desire, left her almost entirely to herself; her brother was never allowed near her; friends she was entirely without; acquaintances she dreaded to see almost with an insane dread, and so they were not granted permission to visit her; but soon her health began to break up in the horrible self-contained conflict, and it became evident to the Colonel that, if he did not at once effect a diversion, the girl would lose either her reason or her life.

He arranged, his leave having been granted, to take her abroad at once; and in two days they were *en route* for the south of France.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE PADRE DROPS INTO LUCK.

IT was Spring-time, and things about the neighbourhood of "The Jolly Bargee" began to brighten up a bit. The sun, at odd times, shone brilliantly on the yellow river, turning its turbid waters into wavelets of gold, and giving it a cheerfulness to which it had been a stranger during the long dreary months of Winter. The ponderous barges passing up and down the silent highway exhibited signs of paint and general renovation; their crews—consisting for the most part of two men, a boy, and a dog—had commenced to throw off their rough Winter attire, in favour of lighter garments; and occasionally, on an extra fine afternoon, pleasure-boats might be seen gaily pulling up with the tide, and filled with youngsters glad of the pleasant change. The banks of the

river were already putting forth something of the glorious green foliage which would ere long blot out of sight the foul mouths of the numerous drains, and such like things, disgorging themselves into the stream; and all nature, animate and inanimate, was in a state of early preparation for the coming pleasant time when commerce, amusement, and the usual annual change would bring happiness and profit to the riparian dwellers of the locality.

At Mrs. Brimmer's things were not quite so bright. The flow of solid money which had in the preceding Summer-time set in with such cheerful regularity in the direction of Padre Cupper, had gradually commenced to die away in the Autumn; had then been supplemented for a brief period with a few sums of exceptional heaviness, but had finally died out altogether, and the disreputable old man—having consumed supplies that were intended to last him throughout the Winter—had had to fall back on the miserable remnant of the Government pension still left to him. That being so, the comfort and consideration supplied to him in consequence of the golden harvest coming from

Dr. Creasey (as Mrs. Brimmer far more than suspected), began to gradually diminish in quantity as well as in quality, and things were rapidly reverting to the old state in which they were when first we made the acquaintance of the retired Indian chaplain. His room—as it still pleased Mrs. Brimmer to call the garret he inhabited—was as filthy and uncared for as before. That good lady's voice rose shriller and more discordant as one day followed rapidly on the heels of another, and her lodger was quite as badly clothed, fed, and “done for” as in that miserable time of the past. In one point there was an improvement, but it was one of necessity, not of choice. The Padre seldom got drunk now—not from any access of virtue on his part, but because “The Jolly Bargee” refused to give credit, except where “The Jolly Bargee” saw undoubted proofs that payment would be forthcoming within a reasonable period. Such proof was, just now, absolutely wanting in the case of Mr. Cupper, and accordingly “The Jolly Bargee” withdrew within the shade of its fig-tree, and declined firmly to furnish any further supplies.

In truth the Padre was at dead low water, and as he arose from his abominably dirty bed on the morning when this chapter commences, he was made most unpleasantly aware of the fact by noticing that nothing whatever in the shape of breakfast had been as yet, according to usual custom, placed on the ricketty table, in anticipation of his getting up.

He dressed himself in his greasy garments, and then, after a few minutes' pause to gain the necessary courage, he opened the door, and advanced to the head of the tumble-down stairs.

“Mrs. Brimmer!” he called out, in the mildest of tones, that quavered even as he uttered them.

There was no reply, only a sound as of crockery being smashed below, and of a child being “whopped,” as a necessary consequence.

“Mrs. Brimmer,” he repeated, “I want you, if you please.”

There was a pause in the row going on downstairs, and yet a third time he preferred a request for the attendance of the good matron.

“Who's that calling? What d'ye want now, I'd like to know?” was screamed up the narrow means of communication.

"I want to speak to you, if you please."

"Then ye may want. I've somethin' else to do than be runnin' after disreputable old rips like ye ; ye jest get ready to clear out of this—I'll have ye here no longer. Jest pay me me money, and take yourself off out of this."

"But you know, Mrs. Brimmer," was the mild remonstrance, "that I'm expecting a remittance every day, and—"

"Drat yer remittance!—where is it? Jest tell me that. Ye owe me mor'n four pounds now, and ye'll jest pay me at once, this very day, or out ye go, ye old scandal to an honest woman's house!"

The Padre readily enough saw that there was no hope of good arising out of this sort of conversation, so he withdrew within his garret to worry his dulled brain with plans for raising the wind. The process was not satisfactory, and the more he looked at the immediate future, the less he liked it. The next wretchedly small instalment of his pension was not due for quite three weeks yet, and he did not know a living soul who could, if he would, advance him one penny on what was then coming to

him. Indeed, the greater portion of it was already pledged to Mrs. Brimmer and others, and he had no hopes whatever from those quarters.

"D——n that fellow Creasey!" he muttered, "to go off and leave me this way—me, that helped him to all that money from the young chap, which he went and lost nearly entirely on that cursed Goodwood cup. How men can be such drivelling idiots as to gamble away their money that way, *I* can't conceive. And then to promise me, when he started for India, that he'd send me a supply—promised! ay, swore it—but how men do perjure themselves in this weary, wicked world!—well, and he never sent me but one instalment. Stay, by Jove! there must be another mail in since I went last to Steadman's. Maybe he has sent it, after all. But I don't hope, I don't hope—there's little hope left in a poor old fellow of my years. Heigho! if I could only get that hell-cat to give me a mouthful of food, and the price of the 'bus in, I'd chance it and go. There *might*, after all, be a letter—a fat letter—waiting me."

The thought, in spite of his remarks about

hope, cheered him a bit, and he determined to face the Brimmer below, and try to persuade her to advance him another shilling or two—the last, the very last, he would ask her for. He groped his way downstairs in fear and trembling, and preferred his request. But the matron was obdurate—not one farthing would she lend him more, and he was turning out of the door in absolute despair, when the male Brimmer put in an appearance, and, having just successfully “bested a cockney” on the banks of the river, was in better temper than usual. He forthwith ordered his spouse to give “the poor old bloke” a crust of bread and a drink of tea, and would even have lent him a shilling to pay his omnibus fare, had he not been warned by Mrs. Brimmer that assuredly the coin would travel no further than the tap of “The Jolly Bargee.”

“Besides that,” argued the wife, “why can’t he tramp it? The walk will do him good this fine morning; an’ if he gets his money—which, I knows it, he *won’t*—he can ‘bus it back, an’ if he doesn’t, he can stay away, for into this doorway he comes no more without money, that’s flat, the old reprobate!”

The unfortunate old man gobbled up the scraps of broken bread the woman almost flung at him, and swallowed down the washings of the teapot with such burning sense of humiliation and degradation as he was still capable of experiencing; and then he took up the old bamboo cane to which he had clung through good fortune and through bad, and started on his long, weary journey to London.

About two in the afternoon, he presented himself at the door of Steadman's Hotel in St. James's, but so wretched, and woe-begone, and disreputable did he look, that the porter refused him admittance until he had consulted his master. Tom Steadman came to the door, and, kind-hearted man though he was, in spite of all his caution and reticence he could not restrain a strong feeling of disgust as his eye fell upon the miserable wreck of one whose horrible passions had reduced him from a noble position in life to one of the deepest disgrace. However, he mastered himself, and asked the old fellow what it was he wanted.

"You know me, Mr. Steadman," was the reply. "I have been here two or three times,

and on the last occasion you had a letter for me from—from—”

“Yes, I know you well enough, Mr. Cupper. From Creasey, you said—Dr. Creasey—the letter was, warn’t it? A precious scamp! And I don’t thank him for using my house for his purposes, that I don’t; and he shan’t do it again,”

“I’m sure I beg your pardon, Mr. Steadman, but I’ve fallen into misfortune since I knew you in India,” was the meek reply, “and I’m very poor, and in great want. I suppose there isn’t a letter for me?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure; there’s heaps of ’em in the rack. But what’s the matter? Ain’t ye well? How did you get here?”

The old man, overcome with privation, want of food, and his long journey, had leaned back against the railings, and was trembling violently, while a cold perspiration streamed down his flabby features, the colour of which had become a hideous green.

“Walked—I’m exhausted,” was the feeble reply. “Let me, for pity’s sake, sit down on the steps.”

"No, no ; John ! help the old man into my parlour. Be quick ! he'll faint !" And the two men bore their staggering burden into Tom Steadman's *sanctum*.

They gave him a glass of French brandy, and he soon came round. Then Steadman insisted on his partaking of a good basin of soup, with toast ; and the best results followed both methods of treatment.

"Now," said Steadman, "we'll see if there's a letter for you ; but mind, you must write and tell Creasey I'll have no more addressed here ; I won't take them in. For I have a good reason to think he's the manufacturer of a bit of villainy. I daresay you, Mr. Cupper, know what I mean." This with a piercing look that caused the old man to quail again. "A bit of villainy that's a crying sin and a shame to anyone calling himself a gentleman, let alone holding Her Majesty's commission, though it's only a militia one."

"I—don't know what you mean, Mr. Steadman, I don't indeed. What is it ?" was the trembling reply ; and Cupper looked so disconcerted that the other felt pretty certain he had

hit the mark with the chance shot he had fired off.

"Well, never mind; I'll look for the letter, if there is one."

In a few minutes he returned with an unmistakeable Indian letter, and he handed it to Cupper in silence, retiring when he had done so.

Fortified with the brandy and food, the Padre was able to at once open the communication which, to his unbounded delight, contained a bill of exchange for a larger sum than he had at all anticipated. He replaced it in the envelope, and then he managed to read the following epistle, rough, dashed, and splotched though the writing was:

"Mazagon Hotel, Bombay.

"**MY DEAR PADRE,**

"Only a few lines, as I am awfully busy, and have an appointment with a lawyer-fellow in quarter of an hour. I send you a bill on Ransome's for two hundred rupees; take care of the dibs, and make them go as far as you can, for there'll be no more until I get back, and I hope to start by the next mail after this.

For heaven's sake, now, don't go and get on the drink, and leave this kicking about—though, indeed, it doesn't matter now much, for I have the game in my own hands, and can play it just as I like. *All's turned up trumps*, and I take back with me proofs, legal proofs, you know, that will just make both our fortunes, if we play the cards that's sent us, properly. I tell you what it is, old Padre, you'll never be in such fettle again as I'll put you in when I get to England and set to work ; and you'll be able to get drunk every day of your life, on brandy, and not that filthy rum you're so fond of, with the money you'll have, provided you set up shoulder to shoulder with me in doing what is simply an *act of justice*. Now no more. We must be cautious, in spite of the certainty of success ; and I'm in a devil of a hurry. So good-bye.

“ Yours ever,

“ FREDERICK CREASEY.”

The Padre laid the letter on his knees in a sort of mute astonishment when he had finished perusing it, and he refreshed himself with the

rest of the brandy which Steadman had, inadvertently, for he knew Mr. Cupper's weakness, left on the table, with a view of clearing his brain for the proper mental digestion of its contents.

"Well," he said, striking his greasy knee with his open hand—"well, of all the clever fellows I ever knew Creasey is the cleverest. I thought he might make something out of this Indian freak he took into his head when he had lost nearly all that money, but I never dreamed—and it such a time ago: my! how time does run on!—I never imagined he'd get the proofs he wanted so easily. And, by Jove! he's right—it's nothing but doing an act of justice, and whichever way it turns out he *must* drop into some reward or other; and if *he* does, why, old Cupper 'll have *his* share, or he'll know the reason why!"

He rose, his spirits wonderfully elated, and something of his old air of gentlemanly command evident in his bearing, to ring the bell. Tom Steadman appeared, and could tell at a glance that there had been either money or money's worth in the doctor's communication.

"Well, Mr. Cupper, what is it now?" he asked.

"You've been very kind to me, Mr. Steadman, but I want you to do me a further favour; will you cash that for me?"

The other took the paper and examined it carefully.

"I'll send it round for you, and see if the bankers have advice of it, when, no doubt, they'll change it. It seems all right."

"Right, sir? It's as right as the mail! Be good enough to favour me by despatching it at once."

"The old man's quite cock-a-whoop over this £20," said Steadman to himself, as he went into the hall with the bill. "I wonder how long it'll last him—a month, maybe. John, take this round for cashing, will you?"

The Padre ordered in a bottle of champagne—the very best the house contained, he said—and he insisted on Steadman's joining in its consumption while they were waiting. In fact he at once—such is the effect of even a trifling sum of money—assumed all his old airs, and a stranger (if blind to his Reverence's

dilapidated garments) would have thought, to hear him talk, that he was still in possession of the very handsome income he had squandered away on his vices. With the sudden receipt of the rupees, and the previous and subsequent meat and drink, the Padre became somewhat loquacious, and honest Tom Steadman, mindful of certain "shady" transactions in Creasey's Indian days, as well as of some rumours he had heard by way of supplement to the strange paragraph of the preceding Summer in the *Morning Post*, tried his hand at "pumping" the reverend gentleman; but his success was by no means commensurate with his anticipations. Beyond stating the fact that the doctor had gone back to Bombay, and further up country, to investigate the title of a "friend" of his to certain valuable property, Padre Copper could not be induced to go; but he did not hesitate to announce that Creasey had told him in the letter that he had met with wonderful success, and was on his way home with proofs that would establish the case beyond all doubt.

"And who may his friend be?" asked the old

Quartermaster, rather drily. "He did not indulge in many when I knew him at Chutterah, nor elsewhere, for all that comes to."

"That I'm not at liberty to tell you, Mr. Steadman," was the cautious reply; "and you will excuse me for saying that the question should not have been put."

"Oh, please yourself about that," answered the other, rather in a huff; "it's nothing to me —only I never knew the fellow to be up to any good yet, and I don't believe he is now, either."

Soon afterwards John, the porter, entered with the good news that the bill of exchange had been duly honoured ; and Padre Cupper, grasping the money with hurried eagerness, abruptly thanked Steadman for his kindness, and took his departure, being very careful to keep his destination a secret, and indeed taking precautions (perfectly needless ones though they were) worthy of a North American Indian to "destroy his trail."

When he had gone, Tom Steadman mused for some considerable time over the incident of the morning ; and when the shrewish lady who

had married him entered the little bar-parlour, they fell to discussing the affair, so far as their lights would permit.

"They're up to no good, that they're not, the pair of them," remarked the landlord. "Creasey's a downright blackguard—always was—and I doubt this filthy old fellow is little better."

"You shouldn't speak so of a clergyman, my dear," said his better half, who had changed her opinions regarding Cupper since she had become aware that he was not a Dissenting Minister, as she had thought when first she saw him.

"A clergyman!—a pretty clergyman, indeed! A drunken old blackguard, who's a disgrace to his cloth! Why can't they make a law to drum such fellows out of the service, like they do a soldier that's no good? It's a sin and a shame, that it is, to allow a fellow like that to continue calling himself a Padre, when he's nothing to do no longer with the Church but shame it."

"Perhaps they ought, Tom; though I don't often agree with you, you're perhaps right on that point."

"No, you don't often agree with me, worse luck!" was the dry retort; "but there's no 'perhaps' about it—I *am* right, and he should be—be—what do they call it?"

"Unfrocked. But he's the man—gentleman—that came to spend the afternoon with that Mr. and Mrs. Wrigley—let me see, last year, isn't he?"

"That's him; and between you and I and the post, Mrs. Hess" (so honest John Steadman, to her great disgust, was in the habit of familiarly addressing his wife)—"between you and I and the post, I think, from what Mick Kavanagh let drop when he was last here, those same Wrigleys had something to do with the blow-up at Dumore Castle—you know, that bit of news in the papers—the *Post* it was—that we couldn't make head or tail of at the time."

"Very likely. Nothing that woman would do would surprise *me*. I know a lady when I see her, Tom; I've lived in too many and too good families not to know one, and *she's* not a lady, whatever else she may be."

"Ay, I hate those canting, out-and-out holy people—they're always d——d humbugs!"

"Tom!" cried the wife, severely, with index finger raised warningly, "you forget yourself, sir. I will *not* have this horrid swearing in this room. If you must foul your mouth with it, be good enough to do so in the stables, or some other place where *I* can't hear it."

"You needn't make such a fuss about it," growled out the more than slightly hen-pecked husband; "but they are humbugs, and no mistake, and I wouldn't trust a word they said, either of them."

"No, nor I," answered the lady, considerably mollified by the mild "growl" that turned away her wrath; "but if you think they had anything to do with this—this—well, this mystery about which you seem to know something, and yet nothing real or worth listening to, why don't you write to your friend the Major, and set your mind at rest about the whole matter?"

She had a lively curiosity of her own, had Mrs. Steadman, and her fingers Itched to ferret out any secret of which she ever got even an inkling.

"Because I'm not a d—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Hess—a common fool!" was the rather warm reply.

"There may be two opinions about that, Tom," said the lady, with some asperity; "for my part, I think the folly lies in your keeping yourself in ignorance of what you surely ought to know. What harm would it do, I should very much like to know, to write and ask the Major?"

"It mightn't do any harm, but, again, it might. It's none of my business, and I ain't at this time of day going to mix myself up with a lot of stuff that doesn't concern me a bit—not I. I never have, and I never will, push me nose into other people's affairs that I'm best out of. If I'd been a prying, gossiping fellow, like some people I know of, I maybe wouldn't be master of this hotel now. No, no, caution's a jewel; it's been the rule of my life, and I'm not going to break it now to please anyone."

And to avoid further discussion on the point, for he saw a gathering storm in the bright twinkle of his wife's eye, Tom Steadman plumped his hat down on his head, and went off to Bond Street, to have a look at the fish in Grove's shop.

Padre Cupper, after taking rail half round

London with the object of deluding any persons who might have been sent after him by Steadman to find out his residence, arrived at "The Jolly Bargee" very late in the afternoon, considerably more sober than was usual with him when in the possession of money, and at once was taken to the heart of that famous establishment, because he forthwith discharged a small score of long standing. He had more liquor, but not in any inordinate quantity ; and indeed, the frequenters of the tap and of the parlour, who saw *some* of the Padre's money, rather grumbled that the old man was growing niggardly, and would neither drink himself, nor suffer others to imbibe at his expense—a course of reformed conduct which they deeply resented.

Presently he made his way homewards, and was very much astonished at the respectful—it was not kindly, for the woman could not be kind—greeting with which Mrs. Brimmer received him. He would have understood it if she could have known for a certainty that he had money ; but it was impossible for her to have obtained that knowledge, and hence his mystification.

“And I’m certain sure you must be tired out, Mr. Cupper, that I am, and if we’d had a shilling in the house, ay, or five, for that matter—to spare—this morning, you shouldn’t have tramped it all that long way to town, sir, that you shouldn’t.”

“That’ll do, that’ll do, my good woman,” he answered, loftily, waving her aside with his hand in a grand manner.

She guessed at once that he had received the money he had been expecting, and it made her only the more deferential.

“But you’ll sit down a bit, sir, won’t ye? I ‘ave some news for—good news, too—and a present, sir, think of that!”

He could not make it out; but he sat down as she desired, and asked her to explain.

“There, look what I ‘ave for ye!” she said, holding up a letter; “and the gentleman said I was to be very careful of it, as there’s a fiver inside.”

He took it very coolly,—he would not have been so calm had it arrived only the day before—and on opening the envelope, sure enough found it contained a five-pound note, wrapped

in a sheet of paper, without address, on which was written, in a gentlemanly hand he could not recognize, the following few words :

“ DEAR SIR,—I am very anxious to see you, on a matter of private business, and will, if you will permit me, call on you to-morrow at noon. As I understand from your landlady that you are in some little temporary difficulty, I take the liberty of enclosing in this a five-pound note, which I hope you will accept as an earnest of my desire to benefit you.

“ Yours, &c.,

“ ERNEST CLARKE.”

“ Ernest Clarke!” cried the Padre. “ Who the devil can he be? I know nobody of that name. You are sure he meant me, Mrs. Brimmer ?”

“ Oh! you, beyond all manner of mistake, Mr. Cupper. I couldn’t be wrong, from the description he gev of ye.”

“ Ahem! it’s strange, very strange. Have you ever seen him here before ?”

“ Never, indeed. Quite a stranger.”

“ And what was he like ?”

"Well, he's an ordinary gentleman—a young gentleman, as is a gentleman—plain like in his manner, and very quiet."

"And he gave no address?—didn't say where he came from, or why?"

"Indeed he didn't; neither could I get a word out of him that was satisfying—not one. And believe me, Mr. Cupper, I tried me very best to find out for you."

Wherein Mrs. Brimmer spoke the most absolute truth, for she was by no means the woman to let anything approaching a piece of gossip go past her without doing her utmost to arrive at its kernel.

"And what'll ye take, Mr. Cupper, for yer dinner, sir? You must be tired with the day's worritting and work."

"I am tired, Mrs. Brimmer, so tired that I'll jest go up and lie down on my bed a bit. And you may get me a bit of something tasty, Mrs. Brimmer—say a nice chop, or a cutlet, or something; and fetch a bottle of port—the best—with it, from 'The Jolly Bargee'—I'm worn out."

"An' well ye may be! To think of yer walk-

ing all the weary way to that London! An' shall I change the note, sir?"

"Give me a receipt for the few pounds I owe you, Mrs. Brimmer, and lay out the rest for what I may want. But, Mrs. Brimmer, let this be a warning to you—I'm short of cash sometimes, I know, but that's no reason why I shouldn't be treated better, for I always have it coming to me sooner or later, and I insist on proper respect and proper treatment as long as I stay in your house!"

Having thus delivered himself, with considerable dignity, too, the old man made his way upstairs for a very needful rest on the wretched pallet he called his bed, and tried to get to sleep. But he did not succeed. His frame was too tired with his long walk to permit of immediate repose; and his brain was considerably excited with the events of the day. Creasey's letter, though it had not exactly surprised him, yet contained plenty of food for serious thought, and do what he could, Mr. Cupper could not take his mind away from the scheme that extraordinary doctor was now actively engaged in elaborating, and, appa-

rently, with every prospect of complete success. That there was danger in it, the Padre was quite well aware—indeed, from long experience, he knew right well that that element was never wanting from any plan evolved from the teeming brain of the doctor; nor did Cupper himself ever shrink from a spice of that without which, he was aware, no underhand dealings could ever exist. But he was getting old, and feeble, and nervous, and he found now that he had not that defiant energy of wickedness which, in his early Indian days, had pulled him out of many a scrape where a less bold or brazen-faced man would have fallen through. He had weakened himself to such an extent with stimulants that now he could not embark on the most ordinary enterprise without resorting to them most freely; and when he was not, more or less, under the influence of strong liquor, he was little better than a tottering old dotard.

Then this Ernest Clarke—who the devil could *he* be? The Padre cudgelled his brains fruitlessly, to solve the problem of the appearance of this “young gentleman” on the scene.

He positively knew no one of the name, nor did it recall the faintest recollection to his mind. “Young gentleman” in the mouth of such a woman as Mrs. Brimmer, might mean anything from a tuppenny-ha’penny draper’s assistant up to the eldest son of a duke—there was no idea whatever to be gained from such a vague description. Yet somehow or other, whether it was a mere idle imagination, or whether it was a commingling of the two chief affairs of the hour, the Padre—who was gradually getting very drowsy—could not help associating Creasey and this Clarke together, and he went off to sleep in a sort of mazy certainty, leavened with uncertainty, that Creasey, Fitzallan, Clarke, and Calverley were all combined together in some gigantic plot, of which he, the Padre, was to be the victim.

“Well, a stranger old rip than that Cupper,” was Mrs. Brimmer’s remark to her husband that night, “I never knew—he’s jest starving and crying like a babby for rum one day, and the next he’s rolling in money and able to be as drunk as a lord!”

## CHAPTER VI.

“AND LO ! THIS MAN WAS IN TEARS !”

DESOLATION was the only word to correctly describe the state of Captain Fitzallan. In the midst of a crowd he was perfectly alone, in the very centre and heart of military gaiety —the regiment was now lying in Dublin—he was profoundly miserable ; and when all of his compeers were, or certainly appeared to be, enjoying life in its fullest developments, he seemed dead to every sensation save the routine ones evoked by a mill-horse round of duty.

When he rejoined, on the expiration of his three months' leave, he found himself, as he had anticipated, received very coldly. His story was, of course, thoroughly known to every man of “The Eagles,” and there was hardly one that did not view him as almost a criminal. Those

malicious persons who had before envied him in the days of his prosperity, and had consequently disliked him, now scouted him as the lowest of the low. Those who had really begun to feel intimate, or even friendly with him, drew back, or changed altogether, because they could not but think that his conduct was atrociously bad. While those who had been merely indifferent to him in the season of his exaltation, almost, it might be said, in the season of his glory, were not likely to permit themselves any change in this time of his degradation, save in the direction of increased coldness and a more harsh demeanour.

Nor would it have been reasonable to expect any other course of conduct. Beyond all manner of doubt, so far as they knew, Fitzallan had behaved, in regard to both the Colonel and Lady Clara Burton, in a way that was absolutely indefensible. He was, of course, not bound to declare his real parentage—for his brother officers had no reason for thinking that he was ignorant of it all along—to his comrades when he first entered the regiment, though everyone held that it would have been

far wiser had he taken that step ; but he certainly had behaved infamously in endeavouring to entrap Lady Clara into a marriage which, had the truth been known, she would have scouted all idea of from the very first. The Colonel, as her nearest and best friend on the spot, though not her legal guardian, had also had a right to full explanation of the whole business of Fitzallan's parentage, and so forth, and that the old man had been deceived, was almost as gross an injury as the one passed upon the girl herself.

Captain Fitzallan had refused point-blank either to retire from the service—indeed, he could not, without the loss of all the property that had come to him under the will of the General—or again to exchange ; and as what he had done did not actually infringe on any written or unwritten code of military law or honour, it was impossible to represent the case to the higher authorities with a view to enforce his withdrawal from the corps. But off the parade ground, and beyond the merest external courtesies of the mess-room, he was cut by every man in the regiment save one, and that one,

strangely enough, was Jack Paulton. Honest Jack, in spite of his chuckling, semi-idiocy of manner, had his heart in a warmer state than that of most of his fellows, and, whatever he might be, he was not one to—as he put it himself—kick a fellow when he was down. His sympathy, as may be readily imagined, was of the smallest possible consolation to Fitz; but it was something, even if very little, to know that at least one out of a whole regiment did not hate him or despise him, as all the rest seemed to do. Maria, too, very contrary to what might have been expected from a *parvenu*, rather took up cudgels in defence of one who had fallen in the world's estimation, and by doing so she by no means improved her own position, or her own chances of ever being properly recognised in “The Eagles.”

The Wrigleys had disappeared. The worthy Christian, Lieutenant Wrigley, had a holy horror of getting into any scrape whatsoever; and his wife, albeit she was of a more than ordinarily combative nature provided she could fight concealed behind an earthwork, shared, in this instance, at least, in the views of her lord,

but not her master. To say the truth, they had been frightened almost out of their senses by Creasey, who demanded all the help they could give him in prosecuting his researches in India—not that he at all needed their assistance, but that he thought his asking for it would, as it did, frighten them into a retirement, which he considered would be advantageous to his plans ; and the doctor's request had been backed up by an intimation, cleverly administered on a side wind, that Captain Fitzallan had found out all their underhand tricks, and was breathing fire and fury in their respect. That was false, because Fitz did not waste a second thought on them, once he had come to look the results of their machinations fairly in the face, and all his vengeance, if he could be said any longer to have any, was reserved for Creasey himself.

Accordingly, Wrigley had used all the influence he could possibly get to bear with a view of being placed on the Staff, no matter in how humble a position ; and—to the intense relief, not only of the solid Christian himself, but also of his wife—just before Fitzallan's leave expired,

he was named a sort of Deputy-Superintendent of some Government defence works being undertaken on the South Coast, and proceeded at once to the scene of his future labours.

Major Kavanagh and his good wife were still in the West Indies, where the former was rendering, by his great practical knowledge, excellent service on a military Financial Commission ; and it was an open question when, if ever, the worthy couple would return to "The Eagles."

Colonel Calverley, with Lady Clara Burton, had gone on to Naples to winter, the health of the former having become so bad that he was unable to resume his duties ; and it was thought that if the Spring, or at latest the Summer, did not bring him a sensible improvement, he would be compelled to go on temporary half-pay—a step that, in any case, he was likely to take, if Fitz remained with the regiment.

And so matters were, about the time when the last chapter found Padre Cupper dropping into good things, in the shape of money, which he had by no means expected.

Desolation, indeed, was Captain Fitzallan's

lot, and the bitterest portion of it was to be found in the facts that the future showed no glimmer of light whatever, that the present was all blank dreariness, and that the past was in itself a curse that was horrible even to think upon.

During the whole time of his “marriage leave”—how the phrase grated upon his raw and bleeding sensitiveness!—he had remained in London, where he nearly drove the usually equable Mr. Martin crazy with the countless interviews and consultations on which he insisted. He discussed the charge brought forward by Creasey, and so strongly corroborated by persons over whom the latter could have no possible influence, in all its bearings; but the more it was discussed, the more plain it appeared that Fitzallan was really the son of Smythe the felon, and at last even the young officer himself began to give in a sullen acquiescence to the truth of the tale. Mr. Martin told him very plainly, after a time, that there was really nothing he could do in the matter, and that, even if action were possible, it would be most unwise to take it, for the reason that

he would be only attracting attention to his miserable plight, without in the least benefiting himself, revenging himself, or doing himself anything whatever but positive injury. More than that, the solicitor now intimated that he himself was inclined to believe the Creasey version of his client's birth to be the correct one, and that because he could see no tangible proof to the contrary. Certainly General Fitzallan—with whom, however, Mr. Martin's connection had been very distant, and maintained entirely by correspondence—had never hinted that his heir was anything else than a distant relative; but, as Mr. Martin pointed out, that fact was far, when it came to be closely looked into, from irreconcilable with the painful theory that Fitzallan was the son of Private Smythe.

“Supposing,” the solicitor put it one day to his client—“supposing for a moment, just for the sake of argument, you know, that you really were what this Creasey says, it is far from impossible, now that I come to examine it, that the General (wishing to spare your feelings, and knowing that the few blood-relatives he left would be very unlikely indeed to know

of it, or to dispute the will in any case) should sink all allusion to your birth, and should leave his own name, with the property, as he *has* done, to ‘Henry Roberts, of So-and-so,’ describing you accurately, but avoiding mention of your *real* name and descent? I hold that it is not only not impossible, but, in the supposititious case I have put, highly probable; and being probable, it is an argument—not a strong, or even a sound one, but still an argument—that this Creasey is right.”

“Suppose it, if you like,” cried Fitzallan, with exceeding bitterness; “and then you also suppose that I am holding the property wrongfully—that, in fact, it belongs to his blood-relations?”

“Not at all. The intention of the testator, though I have never seen the will itself, for probate was taken out in India, was, beyond all question, to make you his heir, and therefore you are perfectly entitled in equity and right to retain the property; and even if you were proved not to be Henry Roberts, but some one else, and that the will was subsequently upset in consequence of what may or may not

be a flaw, you would be perfectly blameless, because of the plain, though faultily carried out intentions of General Fitzallan, as set down in his will. On *that* point I can speak decisively, and you have no reason whatever to feel the slightest uneasiness."

"And I can do nothing, nothing at all, to this infernal scoundrel, who has robbed me, and libelled me, and brought to me the greatest misery I could suffer on earth?" Fitzallan asked, with desperate passion, none the less desperate that it was half suppressed.

"You cannot, as I have often said before; and if you could, you would be most foolish to do so. He robbed you, true enough; but, by your own—pardon me, it is best to be plain—by your own foolish conduct in not at once consulting me, you lent yourself to the robbery, so to speak; and you have not one tittle of evidence against him, whilst *he* holds your release from all intention of legal proceedings. Besides that, he's gone, heaven only knows where; and if he wasn't, he's certainly not worth powder and shot, and has, you may swear it, long since made away with the money."

"But surely I could proceed against him criminally, for extorting money?"

"Suppose you saw him in the street, and gave him into custody, what would be your next step?"

Fitz looked foolish, thought a moment, and then replied:

"I would ask you to appear against him."

"For extortion?"

"Yes—with threats."

"And I would tell your story to the magistrate—well and good. Then I would put you in the box, and ask you to substantiate your case. What would you say?"

"I would say," answered the other, eagerly, "that he fabricated a lying story about me, and threatened to expose it publicly unless I bought him off with money, and that under that threat I gave him what he asked for. Would not that do?"

Mr. Martin smiled grimly at the hot-headed folly.

"The magistrate," he said, "would have nothing whatever to say to the story, whether lying or not. He would simply ask for evidence

of the threats ; you would have none whatever, not even a word, or a scrap of paper in Creasey's handwriting ; his solicitor would interpose, and say, without the slightest chance of contradiction, that the money had been nothing whatever but a loan, which his client would pay when he could ; or, very possibly, he would deny the receipt of it altogether. And, in either event, you would be at once silenced, and the case would have to be dismissed on the spot."

"But would not the fact of the two policemen having witnessed the signature of the lost paper, be evidence that there was at least *some* such document as I could swear there was ?"

"Did they read it ?"

"No."

"Did they even look over it ?"

"I can't say they did."

"Then they might as well hold their tongues for stupid blockheads,—these country 'peelers' are the thickest-skulled donkeys *I* ever knew,—for Creasey would say that it was either a sort of engagement to pay you, or—provided he

denied that the money ever passed from one to the other—referred to an old debt in one of the gambling transactions you were both known to have been engaged in. No, Captain Fitzallan, I'm truly and sincerely sorry for you, but you'll pardon my saying that as you have made your bed so must you lie on it, and that you can really and truly do nothing but—it's hard advice, and may seem even cruel—but ‘grin and bear it!’”

Then Fitzallan, foaming in fury against the steel jaws of the trap he had so easily—nay, so willingly—entered, thrust on his hat and burst out of the room in a wild rage against this devilish Creasey, against himself, even against the innocent Mr. Martin, and against the whole of mankind. Many such interviews he had, but all ended in the same manner, and at last, under the intense misery of the whole situation, he settled down into a dull, stupid, dreary melancholy of despair, that, in a couple of months, seemed to age him by ten years.

For, though the matter of his birth was very far from the main question, that terrible question between him and the love of his heart of

hearts, was what had led to all the rest of the horrors—or rather to the main horror of separation from Lady Clara—which seemed to tear him to pieces, as it were, day and night; and to Creasey and his fearful tale his mind ever turned, as the point from which relief must come, if it was to come at all. His spirit, whatever his reason might come to think, *could not accept as truth* the story that he was the son of a felon, and, dashing against the bars of his cage as he ceaselessly was, he ever looked to the portal whence he had entered as also the only gate of escape.

In the first mad days of his awful disappointment he had been too bewildered to entertain, or even to conceive, any settled intention as regarded his future conduct towards Lady Clara; in the second stage, when all his energies were bent on hunting down Creasey, and making him openly confess all his atrocious lies, the thoughts of her were the only inducements—the most powerful ones for him that there could possibly be—urging him forward every instant almost of the twenty-four hours in his hopeless career. But, when Mr. Martin had

at last, and after infinite exertions, proved to him that he neither could nor ought to continue the pursuit, when the destroying Truth began to force itself on his mind, against his will as against his instinct, that he must be the loathsome thing this cursed doctor had made him out to be, then he gave way to fathomless agonies of remorse and black despair, and the dun night of direst woe crushed him down even to the very earth.

He could not but acknowledge to himself, now, when it was too late, the magnitude of the crime he had committed against the innocent heart that had yielded up to him the choicest gifts of its sweet nature ; yielded them up to him unhesitatingly, unreservedly, and eternally. For he knew, ah ! too well he knew it, that she could never again love any other man born of woman. She might marry, or be forced into marriage, but his soul told him she could never again love. He had ruined her peace for ever ; he had turned to gall a nature that was, when he knew it first, the very sweetest of the sweet ; and he had poisoned for eternity a spring that had before gushed forth with none

but the purest, the brightest, the most delicious waters. And he had done it by deception, by lies, and even by perjuries. She had opened to him every thought of her brain, every, even the most secret closet of her heart, every sign of a love that pervaded her whole being,—and what had he given her in exchange? Love he had given her, certainly,—boundless love, so far as the flesh went; but not an atom of that love which consists in the perfect confidences of soul attuned to soul. He had, indeed, told her, sworn to her in the solemnest manner, that he was giving her the latter as well as the former, but the words he spoke had been lying words, the oaths he swore had been false as hell. Not that he had deliberately entered upon the task of deceiving her; that monstrous crime, at least, had been spared him. But nevertheless had he deceived her, in as cowardly a manner as was possible, in as foolish a manner as was possible, and in nearly as criminal a manner as was possible. For on that early Spring morning when he had dared to make to her the proposition to become his wife, and she had accepted it, he was already quite well aware of the

strong opinions she held on the subject of marriages of unequal birth; he was quite well aware, and mindful of the fact, that she had expressed to himself, and often, the disgust with which they ever inspired her: he was quite well aware that then, and before, when he was leading her on and on into the way of loving him, she would have recoiled from him in horror had she had the slightest inkling of the truth as to who he really was: and he was quite well aware, only too painfully aware, that he had so asked her to be his wife when the gravest suspicions, suspicions that he himself had never been altogether free from, as to his origin were commonly afloat, and when he himself had been told, almost in so many words, by Mrs. Wrigley and by Maggie Smythe, his own mother (oh! how he shivered when the thought crossed his mind!), as it seemed the latter was now made out to be, that, whoever he might be, he was no Fitzallan. Quite well aware of all these things, far too well aware of them for his own peace of mind, he had wiled this sweet girl into an engagement with him, and had publicly bound her to give her hand to a man whom,

had she even the faintest suspicion of the truth, her whole instinct would have compelled her to spurn from her company, even with disgust and loathing.

The perspiration of a self-accusing mind poured in streams down his face whenever he thought of these things, and it was seldom that he did not think of them.

And not content with that first gross deception of one who had never, even in the minutest point, deceived him, he had gone on from bad to worse, from crime to crime, loving her, and drawing all her pure love to himself, receiving the tender confidences of her maiden heart, attracting her to him in every way, binding her very soul to him with bands that could never be broken, no matter how much they might be widened ; all the time professing to her an openness and an unrestrained confidence equal to her own ; and all the time, too, lying to her in thought, word, and deed, with all the power of lying that he could muster up ! Against that lying, that deception, how often had she not warned him ! How often had she not given him chances upon chances of telling all ! Had

she not said to him, that day of the walk to Blaydon Church, that it was far better they should never marry at all than that they should marry in deception ? and had he not, in reply, sworn, with the most solemn oaths, that she knew all about his past, as well as his present life ? He could never forget that occasion ; he could never forget how she laid her sweet face against his arm, and thanked him for his complete confidence ; nor could he forget the troubled night he spent after that terrible perjury, when he writhed in shame and remorse on his bed as he felt that, not only had he lied to her, but that he had also lied to God in her innocent presence, and with herself for the innocent cause.

Had he any reason, any excuse even, for the abomination of his conduct ? Alas ! he could find none—none whatever ; and the thought of that blank gave him an infinitely added pain. At another time he might have been able to find excuses if not reasons for his conduct, in some remote vista of years he might find such, but, ah ! not now, when the wounds were fresh cut from the sword, when the blood of anguish

was streaming in torrents, and when death was a thing to be prayed for as a surcease from a pain that could not be endured. Death!—oh! that he had died in one of the thousand chances of its cold embrace that had been lavishly thrust on him during the Mutiny, when he had gained with his sword a duplicate commission, at the time that, unknown to him, one had already been procured for him at home. Not that he had then avoided death—far from it, he had been one of the bravest of the brave; but with what a bitter sarcasm he now smiled to himself, as the truth came down on him in all its splendour of resplendent light—the truth that moral courage may be, often is, and in his case most certainly was, entirely divorced from that mere animal bravery that had served him so well. Death!—he could have and had courted physical death hundreds upon hundreds of times, and in every shape and form; but it had not come to him. Death, moral death, had seized him for its very own, and it had grasped him as a punishment for his base, spiritual cowardice.

And he would lash himself into a fury with himself, and he would writhe in hideous tor-

ture, and he would crouch and tremble before his own awful self-accusations ; but what availed it all ? The thorn was stuck in him. The lance, with triply-barbed point, could not now be withdrawn. And the sword remained planted in his very vitals.

When the calmer season came, as it must come to us all, sufferers, or we die, when self-contempt had done its very worst, when the spirit had shattered itself, as it seemed, into atoms with its ceaseless strugglings, when the rest of despair began to be felt, then one morning, after a sleepless night, he sat down, and he wrote to Lady Clara. Very shortly he wrote, and there was no prayer, no petition, no crying for mercy in the miserable production. He could not pray to her, for his deeds were too black ; he could not ask for mercy, for he knew that what he had done was beyond all mercy. He could not breathe a whisper of a shadow of hope, for he felt that hope for him was dead long since. But he confessed his great crime against that sweetest, purest, most innocent, and most confiding of heaven-sent beings ; he bowed himself in the dust as a crushed reptile

beneath her feet ; and he told her, almost unconsciously, the only truth he could tell her about himself, that he had sinned against her so fearfully because he was blinded, maddened, rendered senseless through the overwhelming love of her that raged in his bosom. And he asked her—all he could ask her—to write her name on a sheet of paper, or even her initials, or even to direct a blank envelope to him, in token that she had received his confession, and then he would place it next his heart, there to abide while life lasted, and never more on earth would he trouble her.

There was no answer. Then he waited another long, oh ! how long, time, and he wrote again. There was no answer. Yet another season of the wasting fever of waiting, and he wrote a third time. There was no answer, and the man's heart turned to stone, his blood seemed to chill in his veins, the light of his eyes seemed to go from him—he became comatose ; his dearest friend, if he had ever had a dear friend in his wild, wandering life, would not have been able to extract a thought or a word from him beyond the yea or nay of absolute indifference

to all around him ; and in that time of desolation was it that he rejoined "The Eagles," lying in Dublin.

The truth, as may be readily guessed, was that Lady Clara had never seen any one of his letters, for the Colonel took remarkably good care to closely examine all correspondence entering or going out, and Fitzallan's three letters, one after another, were seized, opened, read by the Colonel, and then consigned to a private drawer in the old man's writing-desk.

It astonished the regiment very much to see Fitz back amongst them, but it astonished them much more when they learnt—such things will creep out—that he had been requested by Colonel Calverley himself (and had also received a hint to the same effect from the aide-de-camp of a mighty big-wig at the Horse Guards) to exchange, and had absolutely and decidedly refused ; and they asked themselves, in some dismay, if he really was mad, as his conduct and absence of words seemed to signify.

No, he would not exchange. He gave no reason, only the blunt refusal, and no more could be done in the matter.

Maria Paulton, as has been said, sympathised with the man. No one could tell why, certainly not herself or her husband, but most assuredly she did sympathise with him, and that in a delicate way that was not at all to have been expected from her. She could not help herself. She was attracted to him in this time of his dead-alive misery, and her ministrations—but not until after a great lapse of time—undoubtedly worked him good. She set her chuckling husband, he nothing loth, at the desolate being to try to induce him to come down to her quarters occasionally, if only for half an hour. Fitz often said he would, but he never did; he seemed to forget all about it as soon as the engagement dropped from his lips. One day he was passing her door, and she—horrid, vulgar woman!—actually ran out, took him by the arm, and brought him in. Then he was confused, and she set him down on the sofa, and played to him—she could play divinely, it was her finest accomplishment—played to him low, soft melodies, sad echoes and breathings of the wants, and the woes, and the yearnings of nature, caught up as the living sounds seemed

to be from the moaning winds playing round rugged cliffs, or from the plaintive restlessness of silent waves struggling ceaselessly with the repelling grandeur of eternal rocks—played to him songs without words, for the whispering calm of the notes needed no interpreter to the human heart; played to him the gentle chords that raise delicious memories in the saddened heart; and when she paused, lest she should tire him out, she looked round for the first time, and lo! this man, that had often fiercely charged in the very forefront of the battle, was in tears. Hastily and unobserved she turned again to her music, and resumed for a short time; then she suddenly got up, without looking at him, and left the room, and so he had time to master himself. “A vulgar woman, only a very vulgar woman!—a mere factory-girl, my dear!” as the regimental ladies kindly said—yet had her heart warmed up in the right place; and having captured Jack Paulton for her own, she began to have time to cultivate a nature that was only very human, when all was said and done.

After that affair Fitzallan got into a habit of constantly dropping in at the Paultons’. He

seldom said much, and at first was manifestly uneasy and restless to find himself anything but alone. Maria took good care, however, that he should not be disturbed; and then, so to speak, he commenced to find his tongue, and they began to get an inkling of his thoughts.

One day Maria happened to ask him, by pure accident it was, if he had heard that So-and-so was going to exchange?

"No," he said, absently, "I've not; but is it true? I believe they said once *I* was going to exchange."

"Oh! yes, it's quite true. Yes, they *did* say you were going to leave us, Captain Fitzallan, and I quite believed it at one time."

"I wish you would tell me why, Mrs. Paulton. It troubles me to think I am forcing myself where I ought not to be. Not," he went on, with considerable determination, "that I have the least intention of going—at least, not yet. Why did you once believe I would exchange?"

Then she told him very quietly and gently, and, moreover, very delicately (for she did not in the least care to allude to the subject), that she, in common with everyone else, had been

told that the Colonel had requested him to go, and that, of course, she had made up her mind that he would consent.

"Yes," he broke in, rather abruptly, "I feel as if I knew all about it. They said it would be 'more manly,' and all that sort of thing, for me to leave. Oh! I know, I know, I've heard it all—in my dreams!"

Maria Paulton smiled.

"You've, for a wonder, dreamed correctly. That was exactly what they did say; and, though I couldn't see any reason for it, I confess I thought you would do what the Colonel wanted."

"And so I would have, only for one thing—the thing that *is* keeping me here now—and the thing that *will* keep me here, until it is explained."

He spoke feverishly, and there was a sort of wildness in his eye that Maria did not at all like to see there.

"And that?" she asked.

Then he told her, with no little excitement, of the letters he had written, of the fact that he had received no answers, and of his deter-

mination to wait with the regiment, where he could always be found, until the time came, and he *knew* it would come, when Lady Clara would do what he asked—no more than he had asked; he did not want anything *more* than that—and thus let him know that she had received his confession.

“And then, when that comes—for come it must—*then* I can be ‘manly,’ as they choose to call it, and I will go away for ever, and no one will hear more of me.”

Maria was inexpressibly shocked at the decisive tone and concealed meaning with which the words were uttered. She asked,

“But where will you go to?—another regiment?”

He laughed out a bitter laugh, that contorted his features horribly—the glorious smile was never seen now—as he answered,

“Another regiment! Certainly not. I shall go for good—sell out.”

“Sell out, Captain Fitzallan!” she cried; “but then you would lose all the property, would you not?”

“That would not trouble me much,” he re-

plied, in a tone of perfect indifference ; " it's no use to me any longer, and I could live just as well—better—with out it in the ranks."

" In the ranks ! Good gracious ! Captain Fitzallan, are you mad ?"

He smiled, this time without much expression ; and then he said,

" Do you know, Mrs. Paulton, sometimes I think I am. However, let that pass ; I intend to do what I've said, and there's an end of it."

He rose and walked over to the window, whence he gazed out straight before him, but she could tell that he was looking into the darkness of the future rather than into the brilliant light of the day flooding in from the fresh Spring air. She thought she could give his mind a turn in a more sensible direction, and she succeeded. She walked up to him, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

" Captain Fitzallan," she said, " do you know I used to think you were a generous, good-hearted fellow, and had some consideration for other people."

" Well ?" he asked, not at all comprehending what she could mean.

"Well!—*is* it well? Do you not know that if you leave the Service, and consequently lose the Fitzallan property, you will ruin my unfortunate Aunt Esther?"

Maria Paulton did not know anything of the sort herself, for, indeed, she was in profound ignorance about her aunt's affairs, as were all the rest of the clan; but she *did* know that Esther had some connection of a moneyed nature with Captain Fitzallan's property, and, woman-like, she used her knowledge without so closely adhering to the truth as she might have done.

"By heavens!" he cried, in great astonishment, "I never once thought of that—never once thought of it—and I have been planning all just as if there was nobody else but myself concerned in what I did."

"But you will think of it now, won't you?" she pleaded, not so much for her aunt as for the man himself.

"I will indeed," he said; "it has come on me with a shock. I've been dreaming, dreaming again, and dreaming only of myself. Whatever I do, I must first of all—the very first—see that she, poor woman, is not injured."

Soon afterwards he took his departure, and when Maria told what she had done to honest Jack Paulton—just home in high good spirits after having won two or three heavy pools in the billiard-room—that worthy warrior accommodated his spouse with a kiss, and chuckled out,

“Egad, Maria, I always thought you were a good kind of creature, but, 'pon honour, I never fancied you'd lay yourself out for a sort of—a kind of—egad, a sort of Sister of Mercy, you know—ha ! ha !” and his voice died away in a series of gathered chuckles, not very pleasant to hear.

“Thank you for the compliment, sir,” she said, making him a mock courtesy. Then she became grave, and went on : “But seriously, Jack, do you think I am changed from what I was ? I do so wish to be different—I was so heartless, and nasty, and careless of everyone but myself,” and the woman sighed, as women will sigh when they feel that better life coming over them, which must come if they are ever to be more than mere painted butterflies—silly girls, selfish girls, unfeeling, husband-hunting girls—all the days of their lives.

"Look here, old woman—you know I've told you long ago I married you for your money, and you forgave me—like the jolly brick you are; but, 'pon my honour, I've been in love with you ever since; and if I knew you then as I know you now, I'd have married without a brass-farthing! Changed!" he cried, warming with his subject—" 'egad, Maria, you have not changed a bit!—for I believe you were always good, only now you've a chance of showing it, which you never had before. That's all the change I know, old girl, and a very jolly good one it is, too."

"You silly old fellow!" she said, pulling his whiskers; and then she was silent.

But she was very happy, for she knew Jack meant what he said; she knew she *was* very much altered, spiritually speaking, for the better; and she knew that she was, slowly though it might be, conquering that horrible demon of selfishness, the growth of which her early mode of life had encouraged rather than checked. Maria Paulton of "The Eagles" was, indeed, a very different person from the Maria Wyatt of Bellevue.

## 'CHAPTER VII.

## THE COLONEL RECEIVES A SHOCK.

A LARGE, lofty room, darkened with Venetian blinds as a protection against the fierce rays of the sun, and almost destitute of any but the most necessary furniture. In the coolest portion of it sat Colonel De'Courcey Calverley, in a low easy chair, while his right leg, enveloped in huge rolls of flannel, reposed on a gout-rest. On a sofa at one side of him lay Lady Clara Burton, pale, worn, and haggard-looking, an open book held listlessly in one hand, while with the other she turned idly over the pages, without apparent aim or object.

It was evident she was thinking, and it was equally evident that her thoughts were the miserable ones of self-torture. The Colonel was studying *Galignani*—that literary refuge of

the destitute Englishman on the Continent; but ever and again the gout, from which he was suffering, gave him an extra twinge, and he would stop his reading to utter an imprecation—half smothered, it is true, but still audible. The hotel was a sea-side one in Naples, and the glorious waters of the most glorious bay kept up a constant murmuring, soothing lap-lap against the walls.

The Colonel had been very unwell indeed—so seriously unwell that the doctors told him his life would be in danger if he did not give himself over altogether into their hands, and abandon the exciting business on which he was evidently engaged—a business whose real nature he professed to keep a profound secret from all save Lady Clara Burton; and even she did not know the details of it, nor did she care to inquire into them. He had told her that he was satisfying himself as to the absolute truth of the identity of Captain Fitzallan, and she asked him no more—for well she knew that, had not the story been far beyond all doubt or question, long since would her lover have cleared it up and claimed her hand. She *knew*, after the first

wild burst of her agony, that it must be substantially correct, and she cared for no details. To her he was her lover still, and always would be. But he only existed for her as a dread memory of the past. She had given to him the whole of her heart, the whole love of a nature that had no relatives, no friends—with the sole exception of the Colonel, and, perhaps, her brother—on which to expend its force ; and she had given it to him, no matter how unworthy he might be, wholly and entirely and for ever. Not that she would ever see him again—not that she would ever listen to his honeyed words—not that she would ever hold any communication with him—not that she would think of him *more than she could help* ; she loved him, but it was as we love the dead. To her he *was* dead ; but not for that did she cease to cherish his memory, his worth, and the noble qualities of his grand heart, when that heart had been pure and stainless and unclouded by the hideous deceit which, in those latter days of their affection, had crept over it as some loathsome disease which could not even be thought of without shuddering. He was to her as a

fallen angel. She did not believe that from the very outset he had deceived her, but she did know—ah, how cruelly she knew it!—that from a very early period in their affection he had entered on the fearful path which had led to so much anguish, and *that*, quite independent of her love for him, she could not forget, nor could she forgive it.

The mental struggles she went through before she arrived at that sort of unnatural—unnatural because contradictory—calm had been so fearful that, at times, she feared for her reason; while the effects on her physical health had been most disastrous. She was no longer the eager, laughing, cheerful girl whose life was spent in a sunshine of bliss that knew no element of grief, or even of disquietude. She was a woman bowed down with the great weight of a sorrow that would never be lifted off from her, crushed with a burden of woe that could know no lightening, and ground down to the very earth by a grief that could only end with life itself. For her retrospection was almost madness, and the memories of that glorious past, when she had lived in an ethereal heaven of

loving delight, were excruciatingly painful. But now had come the season of calm (if it had not come, she would have lost her mind, or died), and she lay on that sofa, in the hotel at Naples, a mere shadow, mentally as well as physically, of what she had been; an almost senseless wreck—senseless in so far as a numbed or deadened soul could be.

But though the Colonel had been threatened with what he most dreaded—though he was no coward—Death itself, if he continued his business researches after the truth regarding Fitz-allan, not for that did he give them up for one single day. He did not believe that the work would injure him: on the contrary, he found that turning his mind from his own bodily pain to the endeavour to bring pain to others did him much more good than harm: and in the event it turned out that the Colonel was right, and the doctors were wrong. He improved in health, and at the time (it was the early Summer) when we meet him in the hotel at Naples, he is infinitely better than he had been when he went first to the most glorious spot in the whole of the sunny south. He had nearly com-

pleted his investigations, and was waiting hourly for the arrival of letters, or of a messenger, or of both, with confirmation of one of the most extraordinary bits of romance in real life that he had ever come across. That Fitzallan should turn out to be not Fitzallan at all, but somebody else, might have been imagined by anyone acquainted with the outline of his career : that the young officer, beyond all question the most gentlemanly man in "The Eagles," should prove to be of birth that was now far more than dubious to the Colonel, was a matter that startled him beyond all expression. He wondered how it was that he, the shrewd man of the world, the careful gentleman who selected his acquaintances with as close a rigour as he chose his wines,—that such a one should have been so blind as to receive as Gospel accounts that were now, almost to his perfect satisfaction, proved to be the simplest and stupidest lies that had ever been palmed off on a person who had every reason to, and did, as he thought, make the most careful inquiries into a matter of such moment.

But though the Colonel had improved beyond

all question in his general health, his nervousness had become something painful to witness; while his selfishness, the leading and a terrible feature in his character, had grown to the inordinate proportions it is apt to attain when years and sufferings have filled it full with the food on which it most thrives. With a pain she could not conceal from herself, however much she might try, had Lady Clara noticed the rapid strides of this great blot on her uncle's character; but it would be wrong to say that she attributed the accompanying nervousness to its true cause, for the reason that she had entirely put away from her—at least, so far as she could—all thoughts of the transactions in which, as he had hinted to her, he was engaged. He was very glad indeed to perceive that on the subject she was so far from inquisitive that she ever and always avoided any allusion to it, for he would have been very sorry indeed to tell her, or even to sketch for her information, the particulars of what he had discovered since that day at Dumore Castle, when the light first began to break upon him.

So they lived on—the old man eaten up with

self-care, and with horrid truths forced on him by the facts which the detectives he employed had hunted up and proved to demonstration; the young girl deadened with excess of woe and only alive to the most ordinary events of an existence that was now almost dream-like in its nature.

"Clara," said the Colonel, yawning as he dropped *Galignani*, "can you tell me, dear, what time it is? I have left my watch in the bedroom."

"Half-past one, uncle," she answered, glancing at the jewelled toy in her waist-belt—"half-past one, or perhaps a little more."

"'Egad, the post ought to be in by this time—the English letters. I wish you would inquire—eh, dear?"

She rose, and left the room directly, returning in a moment or two with a large batch of letters and newspapers.

"Plenty of them, uncle," she said with a sad smile, as she placed the whole bundle on a little table by his side; "and there's a gentleman below, not long ago arrived, who was asking if he could see you when he had changed his

travelling dress. What shall I tell the people?"

"A gentleman! Did he give his name? What's he like?"

"Mr. Clarke. I didn't see him myself."

"Mr. Clarke—ah! that's all right, then. Just tell them, Clara, there's a good girl, to—ah!—to show him up when he's ready."

"Certainly, uncle; but I hope you won't excite yourself with business, and make your poor foot worse again."

"Oh! no, dear. There's nothing 'exciting' at all about this Mr. Clarke—a mere solicitor—come about some little matter of my poor property—dry instead of exciting, Clara—very dry business, and I wish it was over." And he looked at her wistfully—somehow as if he wasn't telling the exact truth—as she turned and left the room.

"Clara," he said, when she came back, and found him busily engaged in opening his letters, "you haven't asked me if there are any for you, dear?"

"I don't suppose there are," she said listlessly, as she sat down again on the sofa, and picked up her book; "and I don't care much."

"Don't care, Clara?"—he was quite accustomed now to this miserable absence of interest in anything so visible in his niece, as he called her, but he always combated it as much as he could—"don't care?—surely you care to know whether your friends are dead or alive, or what not?"

She smiled wearily, as the Colonel thus put it to her with considerable warmth.

"I have no friends, uncle; and I know there can be nothing the matter with Dumore, or he would telegraph it."

"Have no friends!—what nonsense you are going on with, Clara! If you have none it is your own fault; and I—I really, 'egad—I must beg of you, Clara dear, for your own sake, if not for mine, to rouse yourself a little, to 'wake up,' as the cads say, and give over this moping, and—and—"

"Uncle!" she interrupted, with an air and tone of great sadness—"uncle, I *cannot!* I have tried my very best—indeed, indeed I have; and surely I *am* a little improved—am I not?"

But the old man looked very gloomy as he went on with his task, tearing the envelopes

open, glancing hastily at the contents, and then placing them in separate little parcels beside him.

"A little, perhaps," he said; "but so very little as to be almost imperceptible—for gracious sake, my darling girl, try to make an effort; you cannot think how miserable it makes me to see you this way—so unlike yourself. See here, there *is* a letter for you—I have opened it in mistake."

He had *not* opened it in mistake, but it suited him to say so, for he dreaded lest Fitzallan, not having received any reply to former communications—for the very good reason that they had never reached Lady Clara's hands—would write to her under cover of some one else—hence his objectionable precaution.

"Have you? Whom *is* it from?" she asked in the most utterly careless manner.

"From Mrs. Paulton, of all the people in the world. Take it."

"Mrs. Paulton?" she asked, in a dreamy tone. "Who *is* she?"

So dull had she become that she really did not think for the moment who her correspondent could be.

"Mrs. Paulton! 'Egad, Clara, you must be wool-gathering in earnest. Don't you recollect her? That d——d—well, that blessed factory-girl, that Jack Paulton picked up with at Chorlbury. Fancy not remembering that!"

"Oh! I know her now. What on earth can she want with me?"

"She has never written to you before?" asked the Colonel, curiously. All the time—though he had said "take it," with considerable decision—he had been occupied in running his eye rapidly over the paper, for he feared it, and did not at all like it.

"Never. And I wish she wouldn't now. I don't care about her letters, and shan't answer it—then there'll be no more."

"But I suppose you'll read it?"

He had finished his cursory examination, was satisfied that it really came from Maria Paulton, and held it out to Lady Clara with some symptoms of annoyance at her continued absence of interest.

"Perhaps I will—later," she wearily answered, crossing the room for the document, which she at once put into her pocket. "But, uncle, do

leave those piles of letters alone, or at least delay them until you have seen this man—this Mr. Clarke."

"'Egad, Clara, that reminds me. I was forgetting all about him. He'll be here soon now, I suppose. But I must prepare for him—must prepare." And the old man took up one of the little piles of papers, and ran quickly over their contents; while Lady Clara mooned over to the windows, drew one of the blinds a little, and peered out into the splendid sunlight, dancing on the laughing ripplets of the great Mediterranean Sea.

Had she been able to notice the Colonel's face she would have seen that it was again overspread with that horrid whitey-yellow hue which appeared there only in times of great mental excitement, and she would also doubtless have remarked the greatly increased trembling of the hand which clutched the documents. They, everyone of *that* bundle, related to the Fitz-allan affair, as the Colonel was wont to mentally refer to the miserable discoveries that had been made about that young officer, and they brought the fullest confirmation, the most absolute legal

proof, concerning his birth, his early training, his dauntless courage as one of the Volunteer Horse, in the early days of the Indian Mutiny; and of the fact that his daring bravery, and his sufferings—for he had been so badly wounded in one engagement that he was left for dead on the field, and actually returned by name in the list of killed—had procured him a commission, without its being known that he was, at the same time, named to one at home. Before the receipt of these letters, the Colonel, though he had had ample moral proof, was not legally certain of the strange events connected with young Fitzallan's birth—now his detectives had cleared up every point in India as well as in England—and he knew that this Mr. Clarke, now preparing for an interview, was come in person to finish up the affair in its fullest details.

Presently the young gentleman was announced, and after some few moments of ordinary conversation, in which Lady Clara took no part, nor, indeed, seemed to hear, so complete was her abstraction, the Colonel turned to her and said,

"Clara, dear, do you mind leaving us for a short time? Mr. Clarke and I have a good deal of dry work to get through, and it would only weary you to listen to us talking."

"I don't think I should listen very much, uncle," she said, with a sad smile, but at once turned and quitted the room, gladly leaving the two to business of which she knew but little, and now cared less to enter upon.

When Lady Clara got to her own room—a pleasant room, overlooking the glorious bay, and the shipping, and the bright-sailed boats skimming to and fro, and the azure mountains standing up grand and defiant in the hazy, far distance—she sat down on a low couch by the window, and Maria Paulton's letter, crumpling as she moved, attracted her attention. She drew it out, and began, for want of something better to do, to make herself acquainted with its contents. It was long, as ladies' letters are apt to be, and it was full of gossip—another characteristic of the female epistolary production. At first Lady Clara read it with an air of the utmost indifference; but presently, as she got to the innermost pages, her interest

became excited, and, in spite of herself, she swallowed its contents with an eagerness and earnestness to which she had long been a stranger. For it was a very clever letter, and so cunningly devised that it led the interest of the reader—as it was, doubtless, intended to do—on and on, until news was given that was of the most grave importance to Lady Clara. No names, of what might be considered a dangerous type, were given, and hence it was that the Colonel, in his very hasty glance at the contents, had overlooked matter that, had he seen it, would have made him put the document in his pocket instead of handing it to his so-called niece.

Mrs. Paulton commenced by apologising to Lady Clara for intruding upon her at all, and made infinite excuses for the liberty—the keynote of them all being that she (Mrs. Paulton) had been greatly struck with Lady Clara from the first day she had seen her, and thought that, as she was so long absent from all her acquaintances in the regiment, she might, perhaps, not be altogether sorry to hear what was going on amongst them. Having thus made out an ex-

—cuse if not a cause for her letter, Maria went on to give voluminous details of all the gossip—regimental, Dublin, and general—which she could scrape together; and she commented on each item with such a keen vein of humour, dashed with sarcasm and caustic wit, that the reader—much against her will, as may be well imagined—really began to take a pleasure in the communication, and read its gossipy trifles with far more interest than she had taken in anything for a very long time past. Then Mrs. Paulton proceeded to tell of the friendships she was beginning to make for herself: of the doings of honest Jack, and of the companions he was constantly bringing home with him; and thus the pages passed naturally enough—and without the slightest allusion to, or even hint at, what had occurred at the time fixed for the marriage—to Captain Fitzallan, who was unmistakeably indicated without being named, and his constant visits to the pleasant house where Maria had fixed her head-quarters. And she told of the state of the man, as well as she could without raising a suspicion that she was writing with any fixed design, and narrated the

effect that her music had had on him, though of course she gave no copious details of the painful scene of which she had been a silent witness. There was not very much about him—not, indeed, nearly so much as there was concerning other officers, not forgetting their wives—but what there was had a weird fascination for Lady Clara Burton, and we may be pardoned for believing that that was the sole aim and object of the communication. And then, with strangely delicate pen, Mrs. Paulton went on (it must be remembered that all this took place long before Lady Clara got the letter) to describe his desolation, the dead-alive condition of both mind and body—so like, oh! so like the state of the reader herself—and how Maria had, at least for the time, broken the dreary spell by which he seemed bound, with the aid of music alone; and how the strong man had wept when low delicious notes of human sorrow and human woe alleviated by the spiritual whisperings of the harmonies, had stolen on his ears. There Mrs. Paulton had abruptly stopped all reference to Captain Fitzallan, and the next paragraph—mere gossip, like much that had

gone before—jarred painfully on Lady Clara, as a discord offends the sense of proportion in a musician.

Lady Clara laid the letter down on her knee, quite unable to go on with the jargon of fashionable tittle-tattle with which it was continued; and if Maria Paulton had deliberately intended to produce that effect she could not have better managed her paragraphs. Lady Clara could not but be struck with the allusions to Fitzallan, nor could her numbed heart fail to recover its full life and quickness as an effect of the relation of the sorrows under which her quondam lover seemed to be sinking. Ah! what bitterly cruel memories swept across her re-awakened brain, evoked by that letter! All the fire of her unfortunate passion rushed forth into full flame once more: all the furious beatings of a heart, ever listening for his footstep in those happy days at Chorlbury, resumed their now agonising troublings; all the great love of her love-laden soul came back to her with a tremendously overpowering rush. Had Fitzallan there and then entered that room, no power on earth, no stories, no lies, no truths—even though they

were the most degrading truths that could possibly affect him in this world or in the next—nothing would have kept her from flying to his arms and nestling there for ever!

But it was only for a moment—for one single moment, though it seemed to her to be, and really had the effect of hours of delicious madness—only for a brief second was that vision of renewed love entertained by the wretched girl; and then, with a great wrench at her still bleeding heart, she flung from her the memories of what had been, but never could be again, or rather she shut them up again once more in the strong coffer whence for the minutest division of time they had escaped, and Lady Clara Burton was once more the cold, haughty, albeit “desolate” beauty, who had fought with herself on the question of a degrading passion for a degraded man, and had gained a victory, though with the loss of half her real nature, as was absolutely the case.

Then she took up again Maria Paulton’s letter, and she went on with its crossed and recrossed items of news, and of scandal, and of nonsense, until she had arrived at the very end,

when she placed it once more on her knee, and every single word in it, except the few relating to that lost love, was at once forgotten. Those words she *could* not forget yet; but so far was she mistress of herself that she *desired* with all her heart and soul to forget them, and so desiring, their effect became momentarily weaker and more weak. And the dreaminess that was habitual to her returned before long—that dreaminess certain to follow mental conflict as day is certain to follow night—and it wrapped her in its hundred stupefying arms, and there she sat, a living, breathing Lady Clara Burton, but otherwise almost as unconscious as a fair picture, or a splendid statue of some heathen goddess. And the letter received at her hands a fate it scarcely deserved. She folded it in two or three squares, then she tore them, quietly and without exertion, asunder; then she restore them into smaller pieces still; then her lap became filled with a number of the tiniest scraps of paper; and when at length her maid entered to tell her that the Colonel wanted her below, she rose, without much thought of what she was doing, and flung them all out at the open

window, where the sweet yet active south-wind caught them in its embrace, and whirled them away to tell of love to the slow-rolling blue billows breaking on the shore.

"Well, Clara," said the Colonel, weariedly, when she entered the sitting-room, "what had the factory-girl to tell you?"

"Nothing—mere nonsense—parties, balls, and all that wretched stuff," answered the girl, languidly lying down on the sofa again.

"Well, if you don't care for it, I do. Where's the letter?"

"Gone in a million pieces out of the window," she answered, smiling just ever so little.

"How thoughtless of you!" he cried, in some temper; "there may have been plenty I should see."

"I'm sorry, uncle—I did not think of you—indeed, I scarce knew it was torn up until Elise came in. But where's your friend, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Clarke? He's gone. You won't see him any more. He's off again for England to-night."

"That's sudden. I hope he has not upset  
o 2

you, uncle—you do not look so well as this morning."

Indeed, that fact was very apparent. The old man looked some ten years older. His face was drawn down at the corners, and of a most unpleasant hue. His eyes appeared lurid and dazed, and his hands trembled violently.

"He *has* upset me a little, Clara—or, better, I have upset myself by being too hurried over our business—most unpleasant business—and I think some of the things he told me—though I knew them all before, I had not positive proof of them—gave me a kind of shock I did not expect to feel."

"Uncle," she said, going over to him, and kneeling by his chair with all that warm affection that never was lazy towards *him*, while she took both his hands in hers and kissed them—"uncle, dear, you are not well—indeed you are not; and you promised me to be so good, and to obey me like a darling old uncle as you are—didn't you?"

He bowed his head, and a smile tried to struggle to his withered lips, but it soon died away, and again he looked so weary—oh! so

weary!—that the girl became alarmed and feared that he was about to have some strange attack. Rapidly she fetched the brandy that was in the next room, and she had almost to force a glass of it between his teeth. But it did him good, and as he raised his head, their eyes met, and the worn old worldling felt that he had now what he most assuredly never deserved—a daughter, if not of the flesh, certainly of the heart; and a loving creature who had sworn to him, almost, that she would never leave him until death parted them. He loved to hear her repeat that determination, and on this occasion he asked her, for the thousandth time, if she could bear much longer with the weaknesses and the illnesses of a grumbling old invalid.

“Bear with you, uncle! Oh! how can you ask me such a ridiculous question? Bear with you!—bear with my own, own darling uncle, who has never deceived me, who has never treated me but as his very own daughter,—bear with you, uncle! Ah! I will bear with you, I will nurse you, I will pet you, I will love you, my own darling uncle, till the last day of my life. I could not part from you now, I

think. I could not bear to think my own indulgent father,—for that is what you have really been to me—that you were alone and unhappy ; you, who have given me such delightful confidence, such a child's place in your heart, and happiness I never knew before I came to you."

He drew her head to him, and he held up the sweet face of her kneeling between his two hands, and he gazed on her loveliness and her innocence and her sweetness, and he kissed her on the eyes as he murmured, and the foul lie did not choke him :

" Ay, my own heart's darling, I am indeed your father, so far as I can be one to you ; and, like a father, I have from you no secret in the world."

## CHAPTER VIII.

## A PRECIOUS PAIR.

WHEN Dr. Creasey landed in England from his Indian trip, he took up his quarters, at least for the time, at Tom Steadman's Hotel. There was, added to his usual air of importance, a sort of triumphant expression about all he did and said which, as Tom remarked to "Mrs. Hess," augured no good to anyone, and probably very serious mischief to some person or persons unknown, even if guessed at. There was one thing Tom Steadman looked to very closely, and that was the money portion of any transactions between Creasey and himself. Not that there seemed any lack of it—quite the contrary, in fact; but the retired Quarter-master had little faith in his guest; so the weekly bills were sent in, and immediate settlement demanded, with the regularity of clock-work.

Creasey laughed at the evident caution of which he was the subject ; but he paid the accounts all the same, and if he had not done so, he would very soon have seen the outside of the door. Beyond that precaution Tom could not be got to go. His wife tried to urge him to find out, if possible, what the doctor was about ; but the master of the hotel, honourable and honest as he always was, and had been, would not hear of it, and "Mrs. Hess" was foiled in her amiable endeavours to gratify her womanish curiosity.

That there was a mystery she was certain, but its exact nature she was quite unable to define, for the very good reason that the doctor kept every scrap of paper he was possessed of under lock and key, and never as much as left the envelope of a letter lying about his rooms. But strange men, and strange women too, came to see him at very strange hours, and when they were shown up they were invariably taken into the farthest room of the two occupied by Creasey, while the doors were locked and double-locked. Amongst the most constant of the visitors was Padre Cupper, who appeared

to be of vast importance in the eyes of the doctor, and from the old clergyman "Mrs. Hess" strove her utmost to extract some hint of what was going forward, without her husband being aware of her efforts. But Cupper was not to be seduced from his allegiance to secrecy; and, indeed, so proud had he grown, as the landlady described his altered manner, that he almost snubbed her on more occasions than one—a course that he never would have dreamed of taking in the days of his deepest degradation and poverty. For a great change was to be noticed in his outward appearance, as well as in his demeanour; and Mrs. Steadman insisted on it to her spouse that the Padre had come into some money of his own.

"Not a bit of it," said the hotel-keeper; "he has no money, and never will have. It's Creasey that's made him an advance for some scoundrelly trick they have had on foot together—that's certain; and I've a great mind to order the pair of them out, that I have."

He didn't take that step, however, and the doctor was able to pursue his machinations at his leisure, while his accomplice, so Steadman

persisted in regarding him, was backwards and forwards, as busy as an antiquated and dissipated bee. Not that the Padre gave way to drinking to excess in the manner he used to do—or, if he did (and he did), Steadman thought he must confine his attentions to imbibing at his home, wherever that might be. That home was a very sore point with Creasey. He did all he possibly could to get Mr. Cupper to give up Brimmer's and "The Jolly Bargee"—but he might as well have spoken to a wall; the old man was, on that point, inexorable, and though he refused to give any reason, he repeatedly expressed his firm determination not to shift his quarters—at least, as yet.

There were other points, also, on which the chief villain was not quite so well satisfied with his confederate, and he did not hesitate to state them very plainly.

"Where do you get all the money from, Padre?" he asked one day. "I gave you enough, certainly, to pay for that decent suit of clothes you have got on your back, and to stop the mouth of that infernal old hag you insist on living with; but I'll be hanged if the pocket-

money I give you will run to the cabs, and feeds, and what not you so often indulge in now—eh ?”

“ When did you see me in a cab ?” asked the other, with just a suspicion of anxiety in his tone.

“ Never you mind, old boy. I saw you, right enough, more than once ; and I’d very much like to know where you were going in such a hurry.”

“ Ha, ha, ha ! That’s a good one too. Well, whisper, I’ll tell you. But you must promise not to let it go any farther. Promise ?”

“ Oh, stuff and nonsense ! Of course I’ll promise. Where was it too ?”

“ To see my maiden aunt.”

“ To see your maiden grandmother !” cried the doctor, in a rage ; “ look ye here, Mr. Cupper, I don’t want any of your silly chaff, so please keep it for the blackguard crew you meet at ‘The Jolly Bargee’ ; it’s wasted on me, I can tell you.”

The other laughed out again, long and immoderately—a process that had the effect of further enraging his companion, who roared at

him to hold his tongue for a fool, adding,

“And let me just warn you that I don’t believe all’s straighforward and above-board with you ; and, by heavens ! if I find that you’re trying a sell on me, it’ll be the blackest day you ever knew. By Jupiter ! I’d think nothing of dropping you into the Thames some night—”

“Creasey,” interrupted the old parson, with considerable dignity and firmness, “be good enough to keep your threats for some one who is likely to care for them—I don’t, and so they are quite wasted. I really have got a little bit of money of my own, and it was in seeing after it you saw me in the cabs ; while, as to playing you false, such a thing never entered my head. I’m helping you all I can in this matter ; if you don’t know that, or don’t choose to believe it, we can separate our horses from one another, and each take our own road—the world’s big enough for both of us.”

The other was mollified, if not exactly satisfied, and he muttered some excuse about having been upset, or not well, and made some sort of lame apology for his harshness.

“Very well, then,” said the Padre, “say no

more. Shake hands, and we'll be as good friends as ever—indeed, this job cannot be worked out unless we *are* friends."

"It cannot," said Creasey, decisively; and the two men shook hands.

"And now, what about Belmore?"

The doctor shook his head before he answered:

"I've made every possible inquiry about the fellow, and I can't say I'm very well satisfied. He seems a rum sort of customer—half a philosopher, half a fool, and altogether undecided. One of those men who never can make up their minds, and who never can be calculated upon to do anything with certainty, even where their own interests are as plain as daylight."

"Of course you haven't hinted this job to him?"

"Of course not. D'ye take me for an idiot? But I've had myself introduced to him, and sounded him as well as I could, but I couldn't make much of him. He's a mystery."

"I've known many a mystery dissolve itself under the influence of gold," remarked Cupper, drily.

"Yes," was the half-sneering retort, "so have I, hundreds of times; but do you think this Belmore's a man to dirty his fingers with a paltry bribe?"

"No, I don't. That's not what I meant. But if he was told he might walk into a splendid property any day he pleased, he might, and certainly would, change altogether."

"I sometimes doubt it. That doubt causes me more bother than anything else. By Jupiter, though he is only a distant relative—too distant ever to dream of his own accord of being the rightful owner—he's a regular Fitzallan, of the regular cut. As proud as Lucifer, as determined as hell, and as mad as the very flames themselves—that's about what Mr. Belmore is."

"Never you mind all that," remarked the parson, decisively; "there's nothing in it that a good chance of money wouldn't dissipate. Nor is that the difficulty."

"What is, then?"

"This. We want—or you want, for I won't appear in the affair openly—as I take it, only to hold this Belmore as a sort of threat over the head of the young fellow, if he won't consent to

give us what we demand ; and the real trouble will be to get off out of ken, provided we succeed in inducing Fitzallan, by giving this Belmore just sufficient knowledge to commence action, to consent to our wants when the same Fitzallan really finds that if he doesn't he will lose every farthing of what he most undoubtedly was meant by the General to enjoy."

The other drummed on the table meditatively for a few moments, while the old man scanned him curiously, and then the former answered,

" You're right, Padre, that just *is* the point. After all, it's a risk, a damnable risk ; but, so far as I can see, the chances are all in our favour, and I'll try it on to the very last."

" So will I—never fear me. But now that all's ripe, don't you think it's high time you began active operations ?"

" High time, as you say, and yet I funk it. I'm no coward, but I confess this last effort scares me a bit."

" Pooh !—nonsense !—don't think of being scared ! It is a mere matter of business—done every day. Besides, you can play the virtuous dodge—say it's a mere sense of duty that com-

pels you to come forward, and all that sort of stuff; and then allow yourself—human uature is weak, you know—to be bought off at the last moment. There's nothing to be afraid of. Besides, haven't you the whole case, Indian proofs and all, cut and dried?"

"Ay, that I have. The whole property's as good as lost to Master Fitz, if I only took the trouble to sit down and write a note to Mr. Belmore. He has no more claim to it than I have."

"Then, in heaven's name, man, delay no longer. The more you look at it, the less you'll like it. Be off to Ireland by to-night's mail, and strike the iron while it's hot. Besides, the funds are running low, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are. Cupper, your advice is sound. I'll start to-night, and to-morrow I'll go straight to the barracks and commence."

He struck the table with his fist, until all the glasses rattled again, as a token of his determination; and then he rose and began to put some papers in a case.

"I suppose you can spare me a trifle before you go?" asked the Padre, meaningly.

The other looked black at the suggestion, and was evidently going to remonstrate, when a second thought came to his mind, and he asked,

"How much can you do with?"

"Oh! say twenty, or twenty-five pounds."

Creasey scowled at him, but he pulled out his purse, and counted down the money in gold, without further remark. Cupper pocketed it with the most evident satisfaction, and after making a few necessary arrangements as to corresponding, time of further meeting, &c., &c., the pair of scoundrels separated.

If Creasey had seen where the Padre went to, or had been able to glance over the old man's shoulder as he indited a long letter, it may be very much doubted if he would not, then and there, have added murder to his other crimes, and strangled his accomplice, who was to a certain extent betraying him, on the spot. The Padre went to the private office kept by the gentleman of detective ability who retained the services of the affable and money-disbursing Mr. Ernest Clarke, and there the disgrace to his profession, as to his kind indeed, sat down and

wrote a long letter to no less a personage than Colonel de Courcey Calverley, in which he acquainted that gentleman with nearly every particular of the foregoing interview. That done, he sealed, stamped, directed (to Naples) the letter with his own hand, and went straight away and posted it. Having so far worked hard, the Padre considered that the season for recreation had arrived, so he took 'bus home to the riverside hamlet which was honoured by his residence, and spent the rest of the evening—until he could no longer see, speak, or understand—amidst the congenial company to be found assembled round the hospitable parlour table of “The Jolly Bargee.”

## CHAPTER IX.

## A STRANGE REVELATION.

"IS Captain Fitzallan in?" asked Dr. Creasey, poking his head out of the window of the cab which had brought him up to the barracks in Dublin, where "The Eagles" were then lying.

"Yessir," answered the faithful Pinner, who was seldom for many minutes absent from the passages and doorways about his master's quarters.

Creasey jumped out of the cab and made his way hurriedly upstairs. He was determined to see Fitzallan, and feared that if he was recognized before he got into the room he might be stopped, or have the door slammed in his face. He rapped at it hastily, and was greeted with an indifferent "Come in."

As soon as he set foot in the room, and the

occupant saw who his visitor was, Captain Fitzallan sprang to his feet, with a whirlwind of passion rising in his bosom, and roared, in a voice of thunder, an inquiry as to what this double-dyed villain wanted.

Almost immediately, however, so broken and careless had the man become, his fury left him, and he sank back in his chair, before he was answered, with what was very nearly an air of listless or wearied indifference. The other noted the change almost as soon as it appeared, and he withheld his reply until the young officer had sunk again into his seat. Then he said, very calmly, for he had steadied his nerves, and regained all his old impudent courage, with a strong dose of brandy, before he left his hotel,

"I want to have a few moments' private conversation with you, Captain Fitzallan, and I hope you will listen to me with quietness, while I unfold my business."

"Go on," said the other, with a tone of perfect carelessness, and just as if he was speaking to his servant on the most ordinary matter of detail.—"Go on. I suppose you have spent all the money you plundered me of, and want

more. You've had that paper you gave me, stolen again from my quarters, and, to say the truth, I've been expecting you."

"I'm not a thief, nor the master of thieves."

"Are you not? I thought you were both."

Creasey bit his lips. He would far sooner have been received with the hottest passion than with this listlessness of utter want of concern in what was going forward.

"I did not steal that paper, sir, and you have no right to say so."

"It doesn't matter—it's gone. I've expected you, as I said before. What do you want?"

"Well—ahem! Do you mind my sitting down on this chair?"

"Not in the least. Lie down on the sofa if you like. It's all the same to me. Only be quick with whatever you've got to say. I'm for duty very shortly." And he began to trim his nails with a penknife lying on the table. The doctor sat down, and went on:

"Captain Fitzallan, I am sorry to tell you—really sorry, I can assure you—that I've made a grave mistake in your business—in the story, you know!"

“Yes, I know very well. In the story that I was the son of Private Smythe. Have you nothing else to tell me? I knew it was a d——d lie all along.”

“In some respects it was—in others not. I’ve been out to India since I saw you last, and—ahem!—it’s an awkward thing to tell.”

“Then don’t tell it.”

“I must. I heard in England—in Chorlbury, in fact—enough to excite my suspicions that I had gone on a false scent—”

“I know you did.”

—“On a false scent altogether, and I determined to go out—”

“Your plunder having become exhausted.”

“These interruptions, Captain Fitzallan, may be intensely funny, but I fail to see the joke; and you’ll excuse my saying that, in business, they are singularly out of place and obstructive.”

“Never mind their fun—they’re *true*. However, get on with your speech; I’ll not interrupt you any more. Only pray be quick.”

“Well, I did go out, to Bombay, and thence I went to the mofussil, and to Calcutta, and a number of other places, picking up an item

here, a proof there, a corroboration in the other place ; and all has resulted in my obtaining and holding legal evidence, of such a strong nature as it will be impossible to refute that—in fact, to the effect—I mean, to prove to demonstration—that I was on the wrong scent as to who your real father was.”

The doctor had evidently expected that this statement would fall on the listener with all the crushing weight of a thunderbolt ; but he was utterly mistaken, for, beyond a slight raising of the eyebrows, an instinctive gesture often made when people feel that they are expected to evince surprise, Fitzallan did not seem to take the slightest heed of what his informant was saying.

“Do you understand me, Captain Fitzallan ? I say I was on the wrong scent as to who your real father was.”

“Understand you?—perfectly. And who, if it’s not an impertinent question, do you make me out to be this time ?”

“I don’t think you apprehend the gravity of the situation, sir. Are you aware that, if it can be proved you certainly were *not* correctly

described in the will as Henry Roberts, you would lose the property you hold now?"

"So my solicitor says. Anything else?"

"Yes, plenty else. I can prove you are not Henry Roberts, nor Henry Smythe either, but some one very different indeed. The proofs are overwhelming, Captain Fitzallan—overwhelming beyond all measure, and——"

"And," said the other, rapidly, interrupting the doctor, but subsequently speaking very slowly, the while gazing at his opponent as though he would pierce his very soul—"and, Dr. Creasey, you want to see what bargain you can drive with me for again maintaining silence? You want me to buy you off, as I bought you off before? Is it not so?"

"It is so!" cried the other, in tones of the most brazen impudence; "it is so, if you choose to put it in that way. I throw off the mask altogether, and I declare that I will have a fixed annuity out of that property you enjoy, to the deprivation of the proper heir, for the holding of my tongue. Talk of robbing, and pretend to make me the object of your scorn and contempt! I fling it back in your face, Captain Fitzallan,

and with interest! Where I've made a few dirty hundreds, or paltry thousands, you have robbed the rightful heir of tens and hundreds of thousands; and it is you who are the real rogue, not I!"

"Have you done?"

There was every appearance—and Creasey could not but regard it as only an appearance, well acted—of the most profound indifference on the part of the young officer; and, indeed, he yawned during the very height of Creasey's indignant declaration of their being accomplices in a joint sort of robbery.

"Yes, Captain Fitzallan, I *have* done. But mark my words—I'm in earnest, and, before Heaven! this time there is no mistake, no shadow of error or duplicity—my version is absolute, undeniable fact; and if you do not accede to my terms, I swear to my Maker I will go straight to the real heir, and in three months' time you will be a penniless pauper!"

He had worked himself up into a furious passion—just the very thing he had most desired to avoid, but for the life of him he was unable to control himself under the cutting, contempt-

uous indifference of this lost man before him. The latter, after a pause, during which the doctor glared at him with almost absorbing rage, then spoke just as calmly as he had been speaking all along.

“Dr. Creasey, I despise your threats just as I despise yourself. I’ll not give you one single farthing more in this world, under any consideration whatever ; that’s my answer to you, my unqualified answer, and you may just take yourself away as quickly as you came, for, if you stayed here until midnight, you would hear nothing else from me.”

The doctor absolutely laughed out hysterically in his baffled rage and surprise.

“*That’s* your answer, Captain Fitzallan—your real, deliberate, and only answer ?”

“That’s my answer—make the best of it. You will get no other, and may spare yourself the trouble of asking for it. And now, if you have nothing more to say, will you excuse me calling attention to the fact that there is the door ?”

The utmost contempt, the coolest want of concern in the business under discussion, the

almost entire absence of any interest whatever in this fellow, and in his schemes for further plunder, were evident in Captain Fitzallan's manner as he rose and pointed to the entrance, and the doctor was fairly staggered by a reception that he had never even dreamed of. He had come prepared for an interview of the most stormy character ; he thought it not altogether impossible that, on the spur of the moment, the enraged officer would have him expelled from the barracks with ignominy, or even might give him into custody on a charge which he could not sustain regarding the former transaction between them ; but he had never imagined for one moment that he would be received with careless contempt, and an indifference that he now saw plainly enough was real, and not assumed. This course of conduct threw him out of his reckoning entirely, and for the moment he was completely nonplussed. But Dr. Creasey was by no means the manner of man to give up all hopes of victory because he was beaten in the preliminary skirmish, and he returned to the combat with renewed vigour.

“ You do not seem to take my meaning, Cap-

tain Fitzallan. Do not deceive yourself into thinking that this affair is, like the last, founded on hearsay. The evidence I hold has been prepared by careful, wide-awake lawyers. It cannot be refuted, and, if I choose, you hold the Fitzallan property no longer than the few months necessary to comply with legal necessities, and bring the matter, merely *pro forma*, before the Courts."

"On the contrary, I quite understand it. If I don't—and I don't—consent to subsidise you, you place yourself in communication with the next heir. You prove that I am not Henry Roberts, that I never was, that therefore the property has been willed to me with a flaw that cannot be got over, and that the next heir walks into it as a mere matter of course. That is so!"

"That *is* so. You have it exactly."

"Well, I've given you my answer—not one farthing more shall you have, if it was to save either your life or my own. What more do you want? My words are plain enough, and again I beg to tell you there lies the door. Be good enough to avail yourself of it. And, see,

you needn't trouble yourself to come here again. If you do, I shall have you removed by the guard."

Dr. Creasey had become very nervous—in fact, he was beaten now, and he knew it. Still he had one shot in the locker that he thought might tell, and he proceeded to deliver it.

"Perhaps you would not be so cool if you knew all I know, Captain Fitzallan."

"Perhaps not, but I'd chance it."

"Who do you think your father really was?"

"Certainly not Private Smythe—that fact my instinct tells me. For the rest, I do not any longer care one brass button."

"Sir, I will *make* you care!" cried the other, losing all self-control at being thus baffled by a man who, barely a year ago, was as plastic clay in his hands—"with two words I will make you care. Your father was a man you know well—too well for your own happiness."

"Yes. Who was he, then? This grows amusing."

"He was, and is, Colonel de Courcey Calverley!"

The young officer turned just a trifle pale as

this mine was sprung upon him, but, in truth, he was far too much broken, too wretched in his bitter black despair at the loss of Lady Clara, to care much for, or even to feel much of the most astonishing circumstances the world could produce; and beyond a slight shock—a shock that but a year ago would have been powerful as some fearful earthquake—he hardly grasped the magnitude of the communication thus made by the villain before him.

“Ha!” he said, with something of a gasp, “that’s the latest version, is it?”

Then there was a pause, during which the two men looked at one another, each expecting the other to speak, each determined to pursue his own course—Creasey that of driving a bargain for money, if human means could accomplish it; Fitzallan, that of allowing things connected with his history and prospects to proceed in their own way, with little or no assistance, or even attention from himself.

The doctor was the first to break silence:

“That’s the latest version, the absolutely truthful version, Captain Fitzallan. And now what have you got to say to me?”

"This. Have you proof—I mean strict, legal proof, that will stand the test of the Law Courts, of what you say?"

"As I told you before, I have the most undeniable proofs. The fact is as I tell you, and cannot for one half-hour be disputed."

"Well"—there was coming again over Fitzallan that horrible, dreary indifference which now seemed to be with him even stronger than a second nature—"well, and what do you expect me to do?"

"Do, sir?" roared out the other in a rage—"do whatever the devil you like! But expect no mercy from me. I go straight away to—to the next heir, and before Autumn, Captain Henry Fitzallan, or Calverley, if it pleases him better, will be a dishonoured and penniless pauper. That's what I'll do!"

Fitzallan had meanwhile rung the bell, and presently the faithful Pinner appeared at the door. His master spoke to him with the utmost *sang-froid*.

"Pinner, just step over to the guard-room, and tell the sergeant to send a corporal and a file of men to turn this fellow out of barracks."

"Yessir," and Pinner disappeared with alacrity.

"You may spare yourself the trouble, sir," said Creasey, foaming over with rage; "I've beaten you once, and I'll beat you again. Good-bye, Captain Fitzallan. Next time we meet perhaps you will be a little more humble."

"Perhaps so," said the other, dreamily; and before he had recovered from his vision, the doctor had taken his hat and was making his way downstairs with all speed. He jumped into his cab, and just managed to escape through the gates in time to be saved the degradation of being put out by the grinning soldiers forming the guard.

He drove straight to the nearest telegraph office, and despatched the following message to Padre Cupper: "He shows fight; very cocky, and won't listen to reason; shall be back to-morrow in town, and will at once visit B—, and set the ball rolling. Get all your papers, &c., ready to meet me."

"First-ration bugle gone, sir," said the orderly sergeant, putting his head into Fitzallan's room a few moments after the doctor's departure.

"All right, sergeant—I'll be with you in a moment."

He rose, put on his sword and sash, and in a few minutes was inspecting the cutting up and distributing of great joints of beef and mutton for the next day's use (it was Saturday), with as much calm and quiet as if the whole question of his parentage had not been newly raised, and in a more novel manner than any he had hitherto dreamed of. He really did not care, now, one jot whom they made him out to be; and the value of human affliction was beginning very plainly to be seen in his case, for it was evident that the question of self was rapidly turning into quite a secondary one, and that, while growing careless to his own interests, he was becoming careful for those of his neighbours.

For when he got back to his quarters, his duty being accomplished, he began to examine this re-awakened question of his birth, in so far only as it would affect others. He was so deadened by the terrible mental anguish, culminating in total prostration, which he had so recently gone through, that really and truly

Creasey's statement as to Colonel Calverley being his father, had astonished him in the least possible degree. He did not give himself the trouble—indeed, he had not the power—to think the circumstances fairly out, and he accepted the strange news almost at once without further thought. He believed this latest story, as he would have believed any that was suggested to him on the point, for the reason that his case was altogether so mysterious as to be at the present beyond his comprehension ; and he was prepared to act upon it just as if the “overwhelming proofs,” of which this Creasey talked so glibly, were already fully before his eyes. He did not care to dispute the statement for a moment as regarded himself, but he did set to work to attend to it with a view of protecting in the best manner possible the interests of others.

As he had told Mrs. Paulton, he had quite made up his mind to sell out and lose all, as soon as he had heard from Lady Clara Burton ; and he meant what he had said at that time about waiting until he got that answer he was so feverishly expecting. But it never came, and as days lapsed into weeks, and weeks

into months, the hope that was in him began to fade and to die away; then it passed into the yawning grave ever receiving the dead wishes, aspirations, and expectations of poor human nature: black despair settled down on him in a gloom he could not regard but as eternal: and he came to feel that he might as well go at once, and lapse into that profound obscurity which he had promised himself, as wait day by day sickening unto death under the blighting poison rising miasma-like from the corruption of buried hopes.

Thus self became as nothing to him, and if there was no great positive virtue in its supersession under circumstances over which he had little or no control, there was the negative good that he accepted the inevitable with a willing mind, and found his only anxiety to be one for the good of persons who were almost strangers to him.

He knew that no one could blame him for holding the Fitzallan property by every means in his power, but at the same time he felt that it would be more just for him to give it up, now that he felt almost certain that he was *not* Henry

Roberts, whoever else he might really be. It mattered not to him whether he was Smythe or Calverley, he would not dispute the case, which would doubtless be at once commenced against him; indeed he would give up the estates without any proceedings at all, and thus strict legal justice would be accomplished, without trouble or worry to either side. But what was to be done about this Miss Esther Wyatt, who, for all he knew to the contrary, was quite dependent on the annuity she received from him—an annuity contingent on his being General Fitzallan's inheritor? He could not, in justice, suddenly deprive her of her subsistence, and perhaps leave her to starve; and yet if he gave up the property, that was, in all probability, what would come to pass. He pondered over this view of the matter long—for weeks—and earnestly, and then he arrived at a resolution which promised to secure her against absolute total loss, and would at the same time satisfy his own conscience, so far as that could be done.

His idea, he felt, was Quixotic, or, rather, would be so regarded by the world; but not

for that would he hesitate to put it in action. He would write to Mr. Martin to tell him at once the new phase into which his business had lapsed since the discovery made by Creasey, and he would direct the lawyer to take such immediate steps as would be necessary to place the next heir—he thought it was Mr. Belmore, though he was not quite clear on the point—in possession of the Fitzallan property, without more delay than the legal formalities would demand. But first of all he would take certain steps for the benefit of Esther Wyatt, though he did not intend to speak of them to Mr. Martin—at least at first—lest that gentleman might throw obstacles in the way, or at all events subject Fitzallan to entreaties and propositions which he could not entertain. His commission—though indeed he had never been quite clear as to which he held, that which he had gained on the field of battle, or the one procured for him by General Fitzallan—his commission was, at all events, his own; and that he determined to sell at once, get as much over-regulation (and he thought he should receive a handsome sum) as was possible, and then apply the whole of

the proceeds to the purchase of an annuity for Esther Wyatt. Thus he would save the poor lady from absolute want, he would be giving up what he held wrongly in the eye of the law, if not of equity; and as for himself, and what would become of him—well, that was a matter, just now, of the most supreme indifference. The light of his life was quenched; what reason was there to care for what became of the lamp that had contained it?

When he had so made up his mind, he did not delay in putting his resolution into practice; but at the same time he went about the affair with a circumspection that few would have given him credit for. He called the seniors of the two commissioned grades below him to his quarters, and, without any eagerness, or excitement, or evidence that it was *necessary* for him to retire from the Service, he announced that he was thinking of doing so, and would send in his papers if sufficient inducements of a pecuniary nature were held out to him by those who would benefit by his withdrawal. The lieutenant and ensign concerned had long before expected that some such offer would be made to

them, but it had been delayed so far beyond the time anticipated that they had again commenced to despair, and indeed had expressed their conviction that Fitz would not sell at all unless a good bit of money was got up to purchase him out. Accordingly, they had questioned their juniors of both ranks as to what sum could be made up, and when Fitzallan put his proposition, they were prepared with an answer that was tolerably accurate. They mentioned the over-regulation money that could be given; Fitzallan expressed himself satisfied with it, and the bargain, so far as it could be, was completed there and then.

Immediately Fitzallan sent in his application, "to be allowed to retire from the service by the sale of my commission;" and a sigh of relief went forth from almost the entire regiment when it became known that the only man who had ever raised a painful scandal in its ranks was about to leave it for good and all. The fact was telegraphed out to Colonel Calverley without an hour's delay, and that noble warrior was laid by the heels with a fresh and most violent attack of gout, as a consequence of the recep-

tion of the news. The telegram was never shown to Lady Clara, nor what it contained even hinted at, and indeed her ladyship had no idea whatever, having been out when the message arrived, that there was any connection between her uncle's fresh attack and the receipt of a missive from England.

But she knew that her uncle was terribly agitated and upset—that some interior struggle of unexampled fierceness (for him) was going on in his mind, and that, unless he speedily regained his ordinary quiet and calm, he must succumb to the disease from which he suffered such incessant pain. He had told her that that incessant agitation was the result of the law business connected with his little property—it was a mere trifle for a man in his position—business in which she sometimes helped, so far as copying letters, &c., went; and in her own innocent truthfulness she was quite content with the explanation, and prayed fervently that all the worry of it might immediately pass away, and leave her dear uncle once more at rest.

And the old man kept his couch in agony of

mind as of body; and he cursed and blasphemed, in his rage against himself and against all the world, whenever that sweet girl was absent or out of ear-shot. And he lied to himself and to his God, for he said, "These things have come on me as a hideous mischance of fortune!" while he well knew that they fell upon him as judgments that could no longer be held back—that the sins of his youth were punishing him in the unrepentant days of his age. But he defied fortune as he defied God; and, indeed, to him, miserable worldling of worldlings, the two terms were little short of convertible.

Mr. Martin received Captain Fitzallan's communication without very much astonishment. He had become aware that his client's mind had received a shock from what had occurred in connection with Lady Clara Burton, that had, in a measure, paralysed it; and he had nearly come to the conclusion, before the receipt of the final letter, that Fitzallan's abandonment of the service, and of the property, was a mere question of time. Mr. Martin had, like all

of his profession, seen an immense amount of suffering in the course of his life, but he had never before known a man so completely altered by mental trouble as was his client. Of course, and because of his professional instincts and training, he resisted with might and main the efforts of Captain Fitzallan to his own ruin, but Mr. Martin soon came to perceive that such resistance was perfectly futile ; and though he strenuously continued it, he felt convinced that it was perfectly vain.

Nor was he much surprised at this new ground the scoundrel Creasey had broken. Mr. Martin had never taken very kindly to the Smythe version of the origin of Fitzallan ; and from the investigations into the matter which he had made on his account, and, unknown—at least, to the extent to which they really went—to his client, he had become satisfied that Creasey's story was *not* correct in all particulars, though he, Mr. Martin, had been unable as yet to get at what he considered a satisfactory solution of the strange circumstances. It was quite possible that Colonel Calverley really was the father of the unfortunate young man, who seemed to be

a mere football for the kicks of Dame Chance; and if he was, and if he knew it (argued Mr. Martin), then there could hardly be on the face of the earth a more pestilent scoundrel—far superior in sustained villainy to even Creasey himself—than this same Colonel de Courcey Calverley, commanding Her Majesty's "Eagles." On one point Mr. Martin was quite resolved—that he would *not*, under present circumstances, accept his client's directions as to making over the property, until the fullest and most satisfactory investigation had been made into all the particulars of this most singular case; and he proceeded at once to put his resolution into trim for being acted upon.

The great and immediate point, however, was to get his client to remain at rest until there were real grounds for taking decisive action, and to attain that end he wrote him a long letter—not indeed full of sound and fury, but most certainly signifying nothing. He told the Captain—it was the literal truth, even if nothing more—that he was taking prompt steps to set the case properly in motion; he hinted his opinion that there might be still further

revelations, which would possibly give the business an entirely new colour ; and he counselled three things—absolute confidence and reliance in himself (Mr. Martin), just as absolute calm and self-restraint ; and if at all possible the obtaining of “urgent” leave to come over to London, and be on the spot for proper consultations with his legal adviser.

To that letter Captain Fitzallan briefly replied, expressing his satisfaction that Mr. Martin had set the matter of his former communication in motion ; stating that he was quite prepared for any revelations, no matter of what nature ; that he was perfectly calm and self-restrained, and that it was out of the question, besides being otherwise undesirable, his seeking to obtain leave just now. He added that he had every reliance in Mr. Martin’s abilities and judgment, but he omitted all mention of “confidence,” for the reason that he had, as yet, kept concealed from the solicitor the fact of his having sent in his papers of retirement. He justified to himself that want of complete confidence on the ground that what he was doing was for the best for Esther Wyatt ; though of

course it could not be otherwise regarded by any man of business like Mr. Martin than as folly, pure and unadulterated. In his present mental state he had no desire for further conflict or further discussion with his solicitor on any disputed point; he wanted to do mere justice, and then to sink for ever into a profound obscurity, to be ended only with the moment of death. He had abandoned all hope in this world, and he did not care to have his motives, any more than his future actions, canvassed and dragged into light by any man, even though that man was his own solicitor, acting for the best according to his lights.

## CHAPTER X.

"I HATED HIS UNBORN CHILD!"

MISS ESTHER WYATT had long since returned from her protracted visit to London, and was once more located at The Pines. Indeed, she had come back to her old residence as soon as ever "The Eagles" had departed for Ireland, and with her the buxom Maggie Smythe, whose continued existence with such a lady as Esther was a thing to be wondered at, not to be explained.

The pair had been living in very quiet lodgings in the north of London, and, for all their friends or acquaintances knew, they might as well have been dwellers in the Great Sahara. Maggie Smythe, as was her custom, had managed, without the least difficulty, to pick up with some acquaintances that were more free than desirable; but her mistress lived absolute-

ly alone, while the few people who came to see her appeared to be, in Maggie Smythe's eyes, either attorney's clerks, broken-down gentlemen, or other persons not fit for civilized society. But though alone, Esther had gone out a good deal to strange mysterious places, where Maggie could not follow her with ease; nor did the latter fail for want of trying; and the upshot of it all was that the servant expressed her decided opinion to a neighbouring young potman—he was decidedly sweet on the rotund and jovial-looking widow—"that her missus was up to some game that beats me, that it does, unless she's changing from all she used to be."

He of the pots consoled her as well as he could with the somewhat vague remark that "most folks *I* know of, are up to games;" and the two swore an eternal friendship, which lasted until Maggie received what she called "the route," and went off to Chorlbury with her mistress. The former found The Pines very dreary living after the pleasures of her London life. She did not know a soul in the regiment which had replaced "The Eagles" in

Chorlbury Barracks, and she missed the visits she had been in the habit of paying to Mrs. Wrigley, to old Parker the mess-sergeant, and to Fitzallan's dried-up old stick of a servant, who, dried as he was, could nevertheless find it impossible to resist the blandishments of this fair lady, and had freely entertained her, at odd and safe times, in his master's quarters—pretty much as the majority of the other soldier-servants conducted themselves as regarded their own masters. And, to say the truth, Maggie very much missed Creasey; she missed him, but she by no means had forgiven him—not she—and she would, if she could, have done him any possible injury, in revenge for the slight he had put upon her by going off without as much as telling her why or wherefore; and, as she said to herself, “an’ me with the mean rascal on’y an hour before he lef’! But I’ll be evens with him yet—trust Maggie Smythe for that!”

But when, in due efflux of time, the doctor returned to his home, and to the astonished female servants whom he had left in charge of it—left with very scanty means, too—every-

thing seemed drifting fast into the same old groove. One of the very first intimations he gave of his return was a call on Esther Wyatt. She point-blank refused to see him, and he retired from Blaydon-on-the-Hill with his tail very much between his legs. Nor was Maggie Smythe more courteous. She it was who had opened the door to him, and her greeting was anything but kindly; in fact, it was so much the reverse that the doctor, on his return to his house that evening, sat down to indite to her an epistle, written in very plain letters and language, to suit her educational requirements; the result of which was, as he had anticipated, the bringing of that matron to something very like the old terms; and soon she commenced visiting him again, and consuming large quantities of liquor at his expense, just as if nothing had ever occurred to disturb the friendly relations between them.

Esther Wyatt, who of late had become far more watchful than she had ever been before of the actions of Mistress Margaret Smythe, did not at all care for this renewed friendship between the two, and determined to put an end

to it. She had positively forbidden her servant to hold any communication whatever with the doctor, and she took, as she thought, sufficient precautions to ensure her orders being obeyed. But, in spite of all, her handmaiden managed to elude her vigilance, and though Maggie strenuously denied that she now ever visited a gentleman whom she professed to hate, Esther was not satisfied, and determined on taking a step which some months back she would not even have conceived.

Maggie Smythe had been absent about three hours. She had promised to return from her marketing within two, and Esther promptly decided to go after her, and see for herself the real state of affairs ; so she ordered out the old wheezy fly from the "Blaydon Arms," which did public duty for the whole parish, and she directed the driver to make straight for Dr. Creasey's abode. Arrived there, she walked, without giving the servant time to remonstrate, straight into what she conceived, from the frightened girl's glances, to be the doctor's study, and she was not disappointed.

The doctor was reclining on an easy-chair, smoking a cigar, while handy to his elbow

stood a tall glass of that amber decoction of brandy and soda-water to which he was so partial. Maggie Smythe was lounging on a couch not far off, and her potation was of a ruddier hue—rum and water.

They both started to their feet as Esther Wyatt swept majestically into the room, and they both looked for the instant completely disconcerted. The doctor was the first to recover himself, and with a half-impudent, half-careless laugh, he addressed the pale, worn woman, who had so unexpectedly interrupted the *tête-à-tête*.

“ Glad to see you, I’m sure, Miss Wyatt,” he said, “ in my humble abode. May I beg of you to be seated ? ”

She waved her hand grandly as she coldly replied,

“ Thank you, I prefer to stand. Maggie Smythe, I thought I had forbidden you to pay visits in Chorlbury without my knowledge ? ”

The woman determined on the instant to brazen it out. There was no other course left to her, and at the one she perforce selected she was an adept.

"If I come here at all, I must pay visits. How do ye expect I'm to keep standin' on me legs all day, about your business, an' not ever get a sit down? Flesh an' blood couldn't stan' it, an' I'll *not!*"

"Well, if you can't stand it—though why you shouldn't any more now than ever, I do not comprehend—there's an easy remedy, and you have it in your own hands. You can——"

"But, Miss Wyatt," interrupted Creasey, "had you not better excuse the poor woman this time? I assure you it was all my fault. I met her in the street, and, seeing she looked so fagged, I asked her in for a little refreshment and rest. Nothing more, I assure you."

"An' that's the truth, ma'am," added Maggie, on her own account. "I never disobey you but just on an occasion like this, an' there's no call to make a fuss over it."

The woman evidently had been drinking again; her flushed face, thick language, and impudent demeanour were quite sufficient indications of that fact.

Esther listened to it all very patiently, but none the less was her determination to make an

end of this conduct. She had thought the matter fairly out at home, and had arrived at the conclusion that, if Maggie was really engaged plotting with Creasey, there could no longer be any reason for herself (Esther Wyatt) keeping such a traitress in her service, and that she would indeed be far safer with the woman out of her home than living in it as a spy on her actions. Besides that, since Creasey had returned, Esther had made up her mind that there was no longer any safety or privacy for her in England, and she had almost decided on selling off her home, and seeking in a foreign land that seclusion and isolation which her own no longer afforded. She would finally break with Creasey; break with her life-long companion and servant, Maggie Smythe; break with all and everything binding her to Chorlbury, and would bury her memories with her griefs on a shore that should never be known.

“Dr. Creasey,” she said, “I owe you an apology for this intrusion in your home; but now that I am here, I think it would be your better part to let me deal as I think best with this woman—with my servant.”

"Woman an' servant yerself!" retorted Maggie, with rage boiling over at what she regarded as gross insult. "Who are ye, I'd like to know, to make names at me? Tell me that——"

"H'sh, h'sh, Mag!" said Creasey; "there's no good making a disturbance. Do be peaceable, there's a good creature, now."

The voice soothed her a little, and she restrained herself; but it was with an evident effort, that threatened not to be long sustained. Esther resumed:

"It does not matter much, Maggie Smythe, what I call you. We have known one another too long for mere squabbling——"

"An' haven't I always served you well?"

"I do not complain that you have not. I make no fault there. But I have, especially of late, repeatedly warned you against coming here, to *this* house——"

"That's kind of you, madam," sneered out Creasey. But she went on without sign:

"I've told you that I will not have it, and now, the very first day after I last spoke to you, I find you here drinking—drinking spirits with—with this man."

There was an overpowering air of withering scorn about her proud lip as she pointed with the index finger at Creasey, and it had a momentary effect in silencing the pair of Bohemians. The doctor was the first to shake himself free from the influence he could not but feel, even though it was but for a moment or two. At once he jumped to a conclusion, at which he had been long gazing, that all was up between Esther and himself, and in consequence he affected to treat her with contempt.

"Call me what you like," he said, indifferently, "only don't bring your women's nagging wrangles into my study. If you must fight, why can't you fight at home, and not come kicking up a caterwauling in this house? Cut it short, will ye?"

Esther glared at him as if she would have killed him, had she the power. He returned her glance with one of sarcastic amusement; and Maggie Smythe laughed outright at the doctor's manner towards her mistress.

"An end of this!" cried Esther, fiercely, stamping on the floor with one foot—"an end of this at once. Maggie Smythe, I will give

you one chance more.' If you choose to come away with me at once, you can do so; if you don't, you are no longer my servant, I discharge you on the spot!"

"Thank her for nothing, Maggie! Thank the hell-cat for nothing, there's a brave girl!" laughed out Creasey, while Esther absolutely foamed with rage, and the servant grinned from ear to ear with vulgar delight at seeing one, ordinarily so calm as Esther Wyatt habitually was, excited with passion for almost nothing.

"Thank her! Indeed then, I do thank her! But she might have saved herself the trouble of discharging me—long as we have been together, I *was going to discharge her!* for I couldn't live any longer with such a female beastess!—with such a monster of a woman as'd sent the babe of her womb away from her for ever!—as'd treat——"

"Oh! good heavens, woman, are you mad? Are you a raging lunatic, to speak so?"

And the unfortunate creature rushed to the door in alarm, lest it should be ajar, and her shame should escape to willing ears. The

action, and the intense dread depicted in every line of her late mistress's countenance, but excited Maggie Smythe to a further pitch of rage; while the devilish being in the semblance of a man, who had led up to all this terrible scene, leant against the wall and laughed outright.

"Mad!--raving! Not a bit of it, Esther Wyatt," went on Maggie, at the very top of her voice. "Why should I be? Haven't I kept your secret for you for years and years and years, an' never as much as hinted at it to a soul? Don't talk to me of madness or of raving, you unnatural tigress of a mother! You thought you had palmed off on me that the boy was dead years ago, did ye? An' so ye did, for a time, but the moment, a'most, I laid eyes on him I knew him—an' the doctor knew him, an' we all knew him; an' you to keep on with your innocent face, and your sicknesses, an' the rest of your humbug! Faugh! I'm sick of ye! Discharge *me*! I wouldn't live with ye another day, if it was to cost me me life—ye brutally cruel mockery of a mother! Hide your face from me, ye monster of monsters; an' it's well

ye may do it, for you're not fit to breathe God's air, ye that would have killed yer own baby of yer womb, had ye the courage!"

Esther Wyatt stood trembling, her eyes protruding, horror on every lineament, her mouth open, her features livid, the very picture of agonized dread and terror, while this terrible woman continued her awful tirade. Then Esther gasped wildly for breath, and essayed to speak; but no words would come; and the doctor, frightened that she would die, bade Maggie hold her peace, while he ran over to support the other. His touch revived her, and she shuddered violently as she shook herself free from his grasp.

"Oh! has anyone heard this?—has anyone heard this?" she moaned out, as one in death's agony.

"No, no," replied the doctor, hurriedly—he felt that the thing had gone too far, and was becoming full of danger; "no one can hear anything that goes on in this room from outside. For God's sake, Esther, be calm—be calm! Maggie lost her temper, that's all."

"I will!—I will! But tell me—how long

have you known that he was still alive? Magie Smythe, how long, I ask you?"

"Oh! ever so long—it don't matter about the day," answered the woman, indifferently. "I know it, and that's enough."

"Creasey, have you betrayed me? Have you had the conscience to betray me, after all I've done for you?"

"Now I haven't," he said, bluntly. "Do you suppose she's a blind fool? How could she help finding out the cock-and-bull story you passed on us, about his being killed in the Mutiny, when she came to meet him face to face in Chorlbury, and was struck at once with his Wyatt likeness—ay, and he's not so much unlike his father, old Calverley, either—to anyone knowing what the old man *was*. No, Esther, it was *you* who played the dishonest and the foolish part, of trying to deceive us; we who had helped you exactly as you desired in the sorest hour of your need; we who kept—when you begged and prayed and implored us to do so—we who kept your marriage from that penniless villain of a Calverley, as he then was, a profound secret; we who, in reply to similar tears

and protestations, kept even the fact of your confinement of this—this Captain Fitzallan”—(How Esther shivered with horror as the recollections were forced on her, in the calm, cutting tones of this ruffian doctor—ruffian and yet—now she knew it and felt it—not such a monster as she was herself)—“kept his birth a dead secret from all but the two or three who must have known it, and palmed him off as one of twins—Maggie here being confined the same night. We did all these things for you, just to gratify your horrid passions of wild rage that Calverley had deceived you into a marriage under the false pretence that he was as rich as Croesus—but did *you* not deceive him in just the same point? Answer that, Esther Wyatt.”

But she was silent, and only shuddered the more at the pointedness of the question. He resumed :

“We, I repeat, and you dare not deny it, worked for you in this way to our own loss and discredit—we laboured for you, we slaved for you, we lied for you, we almost perjured ourselves for you, and what was our reward? You deceived us, you lied to us about this boy, you

palmed off on us the tale of his death in the Mutiny, which appeared in the *Times*, and which you very soon, almost immediately, knew to be a falsehood; and then you have the impudence, the d——d impudence to come here and talk to Maggie and to me of ‘betraying’ and ‘deception,’ and all the rest of the rot!”

“Oh! for mercy’s sake, for dear mercy’s sake, spare me this awful repetition! Creasey, spare me, as you are a man!” was the wail rising up from the wretched object called Esther Wyatt, that had now fallen powerless and nerveless down on the broad sofa.

“Spare her!” laughed out Maggie, whose bad blood was now fearfully inflamed by her own words, by Creasey’s denunciations of her mistress, and even by the prostration and utter defeat of the latter, whom she had never seen beaten by human being before—at least, never to give public sign of it—“Spare her, indeed! Why wouldn’t ye spare her, Creasey? She that spared her own flesh and blood, she that druv the baby she had never seen the face of from her breasts when it sought them. Ay, spare her, spare the woman that gave up her

child to strangers ; that sold him, as it might be, to hide her hurted pride ; that left him to live or die in the hands of strangers, as he best might—spare her ! Spare that woman that pursued her own son as far as she could with her hatred——”

“ Never ! never ! never ! ” cried out the tortured mother, with a fierce vehemence that fairly startled the other two. “ I never did injure the child ; and what I did was for his best advantage. Before Heaven, I swear it ! ”

“ What ? ” interposed the doctor—“ what’s that you say ? Did you not persuade that old fool of a Fitzallan, mad with love for you as he was—did you not, when he insisted on adopting the child, make him give it a false name, and leave the money to him under that name—that money that he will now lose because of your having done so ? Is not that injury ? ”

“ I did not so tell him. I never did, I never dreamed of it. He did it of his own accord, the better to keep my secret ; and had I known that it would have injured, injured him, the boy, I never would have consented to it. It is you, Creasey, *you* that have plundered and robbed

him, and are plundering and robbing him *now*, just as you have for these long weary years plundered and robbed me, his mother! I may have been foolish, bad, criminal, if you like, but you have been ten thousand times worse!"

The first agony of her passionate shame was over, and with that appalling strength within her that could strangle nature itself, she was again gaining a mastery over her weaker humanity, or rather changing its current in a far worse direction.

"Hear her! Just listen to the she-wolf, an' she will make herself an injured angel before she's stopped!" cried Maggie, with all the vulgar coarseness inherent in her.

"I've heard of a caged hyena," was the mad-denning remark of the doctor, "but it seems to me we have one here broken loose."

And indeed, if the retort was bitterly cruel, it was at least appropriate; for Esther Wyatt had commenced to pace violently up and down the room, her great dark eyes flaming with passion, her hair floating after her in a tossed mane of darkness, her hands clenched till it seemed as though the nails must cut through the flesh,

and her whole appearance more that of a wild animal than of a rational being.

“Injured!” she cried. “And who more injured than I? And what I did, I did not know I was doing. You yourself have told me, often and often, Creasey, that I was not responsible for what I did in those terrible days of my shame and degradation—have you not?”

“I may have done so: but it was only to satisfy your morbid questionings.”

“Morbid questionings! What woman, in the whole of India, had been so deceived as I was by that—that—monster, Calverley? Was I not young, handsome, accomplished, all that a girl could be? Was I not the pride of the station?—ay, of the whole country, so they told me; and might I not have married anyone I chose, from the General down to the youngest cadet? Might I not, I say?” She paused in her tiger-like walk, and stamped for a reply.

“You certainly might, Esther,” quietly answered Creasey. “You were all that you have said, and a great deal more besides. But why did you marry the cadet, or this penniless Captain, rather, when, as you say, you might have married the General?”

“Why? Because I was a mad fool; because I was deceived by his handsome face and his lying tongue; because—Colonel Fitzallan was away on the frontier then—he had no sooner set foot in the cantonment than he came and courted me, and told me of his wealth, and of his estates; of all he had, and all he was going to have—”

“Pardon me a moment, but didn’t he—ahem!—wasn’t he given to understand that the bungalow, with all its splendid furniture, and eight hundred a year, clear and clean, was your own—all your own?”

“He may have imagined it, but not from me—before heaven, not from me! I heard afterwards, long afterwards, that some of his brother-officers had started such a story, to excite his well-known greed of gold, and have a laugh at it. They did have their laugh, and I was the victim. But let that pass. Did he not hurry me into a *secret marriage*? fool, mad fool that I was! And then did he not, when he found out I was as penniless as himself, though without his monstrous debts,—did he not then desert me, deny his marriage, with your help

willingly given, and leave me to the cruel anguish of a blasted name ? Say, did he not ?—and no one knows better than you two—did he not do all these ? And how could I—I, a mere girl, friendless and alone—how could I, I ask, but dread the sight of the offspring of such a cursed union ”—she stopped, and she glared at the man and woman before her with a look that was wildness embodied—“ when at last it was born ?”

“ Pooh, pooh !” said the doctor, indifferently (Maggie was quieter than she had been, for there was a fierce grandness about Esther’s manner and wild language that subdued her), —“ pooh ! Esther ; you need not excite yourself so. We know all that you’ve been telling us, but I don’t see how it exonerates you from the guilt of abandoning the kid altogether, and from keeping up your hate to the present day. It ain’t natural.”

These words only exasperated her all the more, for she knew, in spite of herself, that they were just.

“ I did not abandon it. Why did he abandon it ?—the hateful monster ! I knew it was cared

for, and well tended, and that its future was secured when Fitzallan took its guardianship. Why did he abandon it? Why did he never care to know whether it was born alive or dead?"

"Because, I suppose, you had agreed to separate from him altogether, and never know one another, or——"

"No, doctor, ye're wrong there," put in Maggie Smythe. "Ye forget that, when my own babby died, in the course of the week, it was agreed, an' me lady there was the one that put us up to it——"

"It's false, woman! I never spoke to you for weeks and weeks after the birth."

"Well, I was told 'twas yourself, if it warn't—but that doesn't matter. Don't ye remember, Creasey, that I wrote him, as well as I was able—an' 'twas that drunken parson held me han', by the same token—to say that the babby, his babby, was dead, an' that mine lived?"

"Of course, of course; there's the plain explanation for you, Esther, of why he appeared to abandon it."

There was a curl of infinite bitterness on her lip as she asked,

“I do not believe it ; but suppose, for a moment, it is true—is it the plain explanation of why he abandoned *me*? ”

“I’m sure I can’t tell ; I thought you both agreed to separate for ever, as soon as ever you —ahem!—when you found one another out.”

“It is a base and cowardly insinuation, Dr. Creasey, and I do not believe a man breathing would make it but yourself. You know he deserted me under shameful circumstances, and got himself put on the Staff at the war, on purpose to be better able to abandon me ; and what could I do but consent to separation ? ”

“And you didn’t desire it at all yourself ? ” sneered out the other.

“I did desire it—I’m not the one to deny it—I desired it with all my heart, but it was *after* he had deserted me. Then my whole soul seemed to turn to hate. I hated him ; I hated his very name ; I almost think I hated his unborn child ; I hated myself far more than anyone else ; my whole life was wrecked, ruined, destroyed, then, now, and for ever ! ”

The wretched woman, in the height of her agony, flung her arms up as she shrieked out the last words in accents of intense despair; and then she fell fainting to the earth, the first really insensible faint of her whole troubled life.

They lifted her up, bore her to the sofa, and applied all the remedies the doctor's skill could suggest, but for a long time their efforts to bring her round were unsuccessful. Maggie Smythe was very much frightened. She had never known her mistress to be in such a state before, and the woman thought she was about to die, if [not already dead. Creasey knew better, but even he was a good deal alarmed, and it was not until Esther showed certain signs of returning consciousness that he began to feel at all comfortable.

Then came the question of what they were to do with her. She could not well be kept where she was, even if she would stay; and Maggie thought that, if she went home with Miss Wyatt after the scene in which they had both displayed such violence, she would probably do more harm than good to the patient.

"We were all fools," said the doctor, scratch-

ing his head in doubt ; “and what the deuce set us all off raking up these cursed schemes, in which the three of us were pretty equally blamable, I’m sure *I* don’t know.”

“ Speak for *yerself!*” was the retort ; for Maggie had by no means entirely forgiven Creasey what she had against him, and was, indeed, that very day seeking a means “to serve him out,” as she called it—“speak for *yerself, and her, if ye like;* I was only a tool between ye, that ye’re both trying to fling away now ye’re done with it, an’ ye may——”

“ There, there ! Hold your tongue, will you ? I don’t want such another d——d row in the house for a long time to come, and it was *you* began it.”

“ It wasn’t ; ’twas she, with her calling me names.”

“ Very well, then, it was she, if you like it best ; but h’sh ! she’s coming to.”

And in effect Esther began to regain her senses ; and once she knew where she was, and in what company, her recovery was rapid. But she was very feeble, and the doctor insisted on her taking a heavy dose of brandy before he would

allow her to stir. She begged to be sent home directly, but she shuddered—shivered within herself as it were—when Creasey proposed that Maggie Smythe should accompany her. Ultimately, she was despatched in a cab with the servant-girl, Mary, of the doctor's household, as her escort; and as the fly drove away from the door, and Creasey's eyes rested for the last time on the tempest-torn features of the miserable set-aside wife, the unnatural mother, and the utterly wrecked woman, he turned back to enter the house with the muttered exclamation,

“A burnt-out volcano—a hollow crust of exhausted flames! If that woman lives long, I'll never venture an opinion again.”

And Maggie Smythe remained to work out a bit of villainy, double treachery, on her own part, and her motive was common, low, yet cunning and unappeasable revenge.

## CHAPTER XI.

"IT WAS THE PASSION THAT CRIES FOR BLOOD TO  
QUENCH IT THOROUGHLY."

CAPTAIN FITZALLAN managed to keep his forthcoming retirement from the Service a profound secret from his legal adviser until all the arrangements had been completed. England is essentially a country of red tape, and even the simple process of selling out of the Army is one attended with no little difficulty and delay. Fitzallan did all he could to hasten on the matter, but he found himself impeded at every step; and it seemed that the more he urged speed, the greater was the time wasted by the authorities. He chafed terribly at this procrastination, which sorely irritated him once he had made up his mind to take the final step; and he was also in a state of anxious uncertainty as to the mysterious doings of Mr. Mar-

tin, from whom he could extract nothing whatever of a satisfactory nature. The solicitor, in place of explaining the cause of proceedings in regard to the will not being at once taken, pleaded the natural and justifiable slowness of legal practice, and silenced his client, whenever the clamour of the latter became too warm to be agreeable, with such oceans of unintelligible law jargon as nearly drove the young officer crazy.

For now another change had come over the latter, and he was no longer listlessly indifferent to his own affairs, or to what was going on around him. On the contrary, he was full of feverish eagerness to get everything settled, and to be able to plunge into that obscurity which he looked forward to as other men do to dreams of bliss that never can be realised. That retirement, and the settlement on Esther Wyatt, with occasional hastily-conceived letters to Mr. Martin, as referred to above, occupied all the thought he could spare from the contemplation of the great sorrow and the great loss which made up so vast a portion of his present existence, and he wandered about, out

into far country lanes, or away into the recesses of the Dublin mountains, entirely by himself, in a state of dreary restlessness, whenever he could get leave of absence from duty, or from the hated barracks.

Occasionally, but only very seldom of late, he dropped in at Maria Paulton's, and he never went away before asking for, and being willingly treated to some of the grand old music that had first roused him from the deadly apathy he had fallen into. But he spoke very little about himself or his plans during these visits ; he never in the remotest manner alluded to the past, or even hinted at the existence of Lady Clara Burton ; and Maria and Jack, of course, never cared to revert to them either. Rather, it should be said, they did care very considerably ; but a delicacy and a consideration had come to this "factory-girl" which no one could have expected from her antecedents, and she felt that it would be unwise as well as unkind to seek for confidences from a man whose life seemed blasted. They knew, of course, that he was going to sell ; they guessed also that there had been some

further painful revelations made as to his origin, and the hold he had on the property ; they were certain that he would inevitably lose the latter as soon as his name appeared in the *Gazette*—these things he had of his own accord told them, or hinted to them ; but beyond what he said, and it was very little, they did not seek to inquire.

"No, Jack," said Maria one evening, just after Fitzallan had left them—"no, nothing can be done for him. He is a lost, ruined man, and though I pity him from the bottom of my heart, I cannot but see that he has brought every bit of this on himself." And she sighed as she again turned to some embroidery just then occupying her attention.

"I'm beginning to think you're right, after all, Maria," answered Jack from the sofa on which he was stretched, engaged in the intellectual occupation of stroking his moustache ; "but I can't for the life of me see how he got into this mess himself. If those d——d——"

"Jack !"

"I beg your pardon, Maria, but a fellow *must* swear sometimes. Well, but if those blessed—

will that do?—Wrigleys had held their confounded tongues, and that scoundrel doctor had not picked up the scent their spite sniffed out, nothing would have been known about this affair; and what odds would it have been to Lady Clara, or to himself, for that matter?"

"You old stupid! Nothing, of course, to either of them, because neither would have known anything about it. But when he *did* know, and concealed it from her—kept from her all the time he was courting her a truth that he must have known was most offensive to all her ideas and to all her thoughts—then he was undoubtedly in the wrong, and now he's suffering for it."

"But he would, according to that, have suffered all the same if he had told her—eh, Maria? She'd have chucked him over?"

"True. But he wouldn't have got so deep in love with her; there wouldn't have been that awful *exposé*. He wouldn't have that torturing self-reproach which, as he told me not so very long ago, is killing him."

"Then altogether you think Fitz has been a—ahem!—a fool, and the verdict is 'serve

him right'—eh, Maria?" queried the most unromantic Jack.

"Ah! poor fellow, it's hard to say," answered Maria, with a sigh. "I suppose he did not think there was anything *very* wrong in concealment. Perhaps he thought she loved him for himself alone; perhaps he never dreamed that when she was so—so—you know what I mean?"

"No, I don't. Eh?" And Jack indulged in a series of quiet chuckles over some internal joke.

"You great stupid fellow, you do, well enough! You know she gave him great encouragement; she was in love with him just as much as he was with her; and perhaps he thought, for that reason, that she wouldn't care who or what he was, as long as he loved her back again."

"If he thought *that*, then he would have told her all—eh?"

"Well, it's all a muddle," philosophised Maria, sighing again, "and there's little use speculating on what might have been, and what isn't. He's quite ruined, and I'm

very sorry for him, and that's all about it."

With which sage remark Maria Paulton got up and crossed to the piano ; and then she sent out on the night-air such floods of melody as collected a little crowd under the windows ; and her husband went off to sleep, and as she turned round and saw *that* effect of her music, she wondered if, after all, life is not a disappointing dream, in which no one is entirely satisfied—no one grasps the prize self-set before his eyes.

And in the meantime Fitzallan was chafing his soul out at the delays upon delays managed at the War Office as well as at the Horse Guards. He could not account for them, and began to think, considerably over three months having elapsed since he had sent in his papers, that something must be radically wrong, and that he had better run over and see to the affair in person. He could have got leave long before if he had so chosen, but he did not apply, for the double reason that he was still, without at all being aware of it himself, hoping against hope that he might hear from Lady Clara Burton, or at least from the man who, he had now

reason to believe, was his father ; and that he was inflicting upon himself, by staying amidst the silent taunts and unformed sneers of all those who had seen him in his glory and pride and joy, the severest punishment that could be devised for his crime against the love of his heart, the delight of his soul, now lost to him for ever. But at last he could stand it no longer ; he applied for leave, and the following morning found him in London.

There *had* been unnecessary delays, and on investigation he found they had been fostered by his own solicitor, Mr. Martin, who was possessed of considerable influence in some very high quarters indeed. The object of this interference Fitzallan could readily divine ; but, as he had quite made up his mind as to his future, he determined to thwart the doubtless good intentions of his man of business, and ultimately succeeded, without having even an interview with the latter, who did not indeed know that his client was in town. In fact Fitzallan, who was unquestionably entitled to the sole management of his own affairs, managed to drive, not the fear of Heaven, but of Parliament—

he knew several of the most prominent “Colo-nels” in the House—into the hearts of the mili-tary authorities to such an extent that he was even able to get the full price of his commission made payable at Cox’s before his name appeared in the *Gazette*; and, as the over-regulation money was already lodged there to his credit, he was in a position to carry out his intentions in regard to Esther Wyatt, without his legal ad-viser being in the least aware of what was going on under his very nose. In fact, Mr. Martin’s client, to make assurance doubly sure, employed another solicitor to invest the money (all but a few hundred pounds, which the un-fortunate young fellow reserved for his own immediate needs) to the best advantage, in the name of Miss Esther Wyatt; and then he re-turned to Dublin, to await the appearance of his name in the *Gazette*. In the very brief in-terval that ensued he disposed of all his furni-ture, &c., of any value, packed up and ware-housed the few things he desired to keep as mementoes of a brilliant and, up to a certain period, most happy past; then, the very hour in which the papers arrived with the news of

his being gazetted out, he went over and bade a brief but infinitely touching farewell to Maria Paulton and her husband, scribbled a hasty note telling Mr. Martin of the step he had taken, put one portmanteau in a cab, and then, having placed twenty sovereigns as a final gift in the horny hands of the faithful Pinner, he was driven out of the barrack-yard, and disappeared without leaving a trace behind him—without mentioning to one living being his intentions, or even a probable address.

Two days afterwards a letter directed in a villainous hand, and bearing the Chorlbury postmark, arrived for him. Pinner, who had gone back to the ranks, did not know what to do with it, and took it to the Orderly Room. The Adjutant returned it to the post-office as "Gone; no address," and subsequently—it having been written on his stamped paper, and the signature being illegible—it was returned through the Dead Letter Office to Dr. Creasey, whose curses, when he had mastered its contents, were something fearful to hear. To understand why the doctor should be in such a tremendous passion as he displayed the letter, it will be

needful to go back to a period very shortly after the eventful day when Creasey had announced to Captain Fitzallan his true paternity, had suppressed all mention of the mother, and had been foiled by the determination of his former victim to let everything go sooner than trouble himself further in that time of his great woe.

But because the scoundrel doctor had been foiled, was with him no reason why he should altogether give up the battle, and he returned to London fully determined to place himself in direct communication with Mr. Belmore, to seek a fair reward for his services in putting that gentleman in the way of adding a large fortune to his already overgrown wealth, and at the same time to play his cards so dexterously—that is, to play *some*, and leave the others unknown—that he could make morally sure of a goodly sum of money, either from Belmore or from Fitzallan, whose repentance of his insane folly in refusing to buy the doctor off the latter considered a mere question of time. He had also to keep old Cupper, of whose honest dishonesty he was, of late, by no means so certain as he would have liked to be, quiet with lies, with

money, and with drink ; and he had likewise a very difficult game to play with such an important element in his scheme as Maggie Smythe, whose revengeful nature he well knew, and who was not easily to be cajoled with a few namby-pamby false explanations of the trick he had played upon her, in getting away from Chorlbury with all the money intact which he had, with her most material aid, extorted from Fitz-allan.

The doctor found Mr. Belmore—a wandering genius, whose head-quarters were supposed to be in Brighton, though he was to be found everywhere, from Cornhill to Cairo—a most difficult man, first to catch, then to bring to a due consideration of his own interests, and, finally, to get anything at all approaching to the decisive from. Eventually he hunted him down in Vienna, and told the careless heir to this fine property, which seemed likely to be soon going a-begging, as much of the tale about the present holder as was compatible with the narrator's own interests.

Mr. Belmore really did not seem to care one way or the other, and, in truth, appeared in-

tensely worried with the whole affair. At first he said he didn't need anything more than the fortune he already enjoyed, far more than ample, as he remarked, for the wants of a bachelor without kith or kin ; then he thought the game was not worth the candle ; next he feared that he should only be boring himself for nothing, as he was aware that the upsetting of a will was one of the most difficult things in the world ; finally (it must be remembered that there were a number of interviews, forced on the man before his informant could get even the above answers from him), he told Creasey to get to the devil out of the place, as a disturbing nuisance which was affecting the proper action of the liver, and it was only when the doctor was flinging out of the room in a rage, with the exclamation, "Then I can only say you're a common fool, to allow yourself to be robbed by a barefaced impostor!" that Mr. Belmore's tender point was reached, and he consented to (for the first time) properly listen to Creasey's weak decoction of the truth of the case.

This Belmore, like many another man, would fling money away, or spend it on the most

entirely worthless objects, without ever giving it a thought ; tell him that he was being robbed, and, for the moment at least, his whole soul was up in arms against the spoiler of his vineyard, and eager for the fray. To the doctor's delight, he promised to place the matter in the hands of his solicitors, with full power to act for him ; gave Creasey some sort of credentials to the same gentlemen, with a promise that he (Belmore) would really keep them *au courant* with his movements, in case communication should turn out to be desirable ; and then—glad to be rid, as he considered, of the whole affair—he went off on a wild-goose chase down the Danube, having first been relieved of a cheque for a couple of hundred pounds in favour of his worrying informant, and speedily forgot all about the matter.

Creasey returned to London, and was not received by Mr. Belmore's solicitors with those open arms which he had expected. They were an old-fashioned firm, doing a large and remarkably profitable family business, but they were not at all the people to rush harum-scarum into any new ideas, and they threw tons of cold

water on the whole of the doctor's project. They said they must have time to communicate directly with their client, that they must go very slowly and cautiously to work, that there were immense preliminary investigations to be initiated, and that before they could move they must satisfy themselves that the first foundations of the edifice Creasey had raised were solid, and would bear the closest examination.

Nor did Creasey get much more satisfaction out of the Padre. That worthy light of the Indian Church now seemed to be as anxious for delay as he had before been for action. He put the case in the most unfavourable light possible. He said he was afraid the whole thing had been made a bungle of; that they were in considerable danger, if Fitzallan chose to move, of being indicted for conspiracy; that the alleged facts and proofs were by no means so clear or certain as they had been first represented to be; and that, before he would go any further, he must have some tangible guarantee against punishment or loss.

"Loss!" cried the doctor at this stage, "what in the name of commonsense have *you* to lose?"

"More perhaps than you think, Dr. Creasey," said the other, with something of the bygone dignity in his manner—"first, I have my pension—"

"Reduced to twenty-five shillings a week!" sneered the other.

"The more need to keep what's left of it. But, as I told you, it happens I have lately dropped into something else; and, in point of fact, my dear Creasey, though I am bound—haven't I solemnly promised?—to help you, yet I really must beg for a little more caution, a little more cool judgment, a little more—"

"Gammon! That's about it, you snivelling old scoundrel! Look here, I've told you before what I'd do to you if you play me false, and now I repeat it—by the living! if you sell me in this job, I'll have your life as sure as your name's Cupper. I'm in earnest."

And there *was* a terrible earnestness about the manner of the first villain as he rose from the table of the Fleet Street tavern-parlour, in which they had met for consultation, and smashed his fist down amidst the glasses—so great an earnestness that the Padre trembled

all over, and did not close an eye during the whole of the subsequent night.

Then the doctor went back to Chorlbury, and found his hands pretty full with making out ample details of the case, with writing long and useless (because rarely delivered) letters to Mr. Belmore, with worrying that gentleman's legal advisers, with cajoling Maggie Smythe back to her allegiance, and with concocting schemes to dispense with the services of Cupper, if such a step should become needful, and to bring Fitz-allan once more to a sense of his blind folly.

It was while engaged in these multifarious labours that Esther Wyatt had gone down to his house to look for her erring domestic, and the schemer was, if the truth must be told, not very sorry of the opportunity afforded of setting the two by the ears, and of retaining under his own eye Mistress Margaret Smythe. He did not care much, if at all, now, what became of Miss Wyatt; to him she was "played out," as the Americans say. And besides, he knew that, because she was dependent on an English-held income, he could nearly always find her out if he really required, or had need to enforce, her

services. With Maggie Smythe it was very different. She was now, as ever, his trump card, and he bitterly repented the folly which had led him, in a moment of sanguine anticipation, to offend her so deeply as he had done. He thought she had, however, forgiven him all that long ago, and so he had promoted, rather than assuaged the quarrel between mistress and maid, to make certain of keeping the latter by his side.

But he was mistaken. Maggie Smythe had *not* at all forgiven him; but, on the contrary, was seeking, by every means in her power, and with all the low cunning which lay deep hidden under her apparent devil-may-careishness, to kill two birds with one stone—to punish this fellow who had deceived and, as she mentally put it, robbed her, and to secure for herself, from Captain Fitzallan direct, a private and large share in the plunder which she thought there would be to divide. Indeed she had been playing a profound, if silent, double game ever since the doctor had first taken her into his confidence when he hit upon the trail the spiteful malice of the Wrigleys had started, and she had not

lost a single opportunity, by prying, listening, opening letters, and so forth, of making herself just as thoroughly mistress of the whole case as he was master of it. Indeed, by the time of the scene with Esther, she knew more of it, for her singular position gave her triple facilities for getting at the whole truth, so far as any human being could get at it. She was enabled to out-maneuvre Mrs. Wrigley and the Christian Lieutenant; she could and did avail herself of all Esther Wyatt's papers and letters to Creasey, as well as to others; she could and did (for instance, in the case of stealing Creasey's letter of release from Fitz-allan's quarters) make herself thoroughly acquainted with what may be called the defence side of the affair; she could and did know all about the money-payments, for it was her foot that had cracked the rotten sticks near that lonely and dark Summer-house, where the victim of the plot first made such a consummate fool of himself; and finally, she could and did examine, in the scores of times when she was alone in his house, all the papers and documents of the doctor that she could get at—and if any-

one in the world had a broad, comprehensive grasp of all the bearings of the Fitzallan case, assuredly that person was Mistress Margaret Smythe.

She had managed to get all this information without exciting any but the merest ordinary suspicion on the part of those most concerned, but the deficiencies of her education had hindered her in making prompt use of it. When, however, she had at length succeeded in tabulating it all, and in making the whole story as plain as she could, she had despatched an outline of it, with a request that she might be saved from Creasey's clutches before any action was taken in it, to Captain Fitzallan, at the barracks in Dublin, where "The Eagles" were lying; and it was that communication which fell by the night-post into the doctor's hands, and made him swear so fearfully.

Fortunately for the woman, fortunately for him, she was out when the letter arrived. Had she been in his presence, her life even would have not been worth a moment's purchase. He was frantic, wild, raving mad with passion—and it was the passion that cries for blood to

quench it thoroughly. Presently there came calmer thoughts—the deadly calmness of quickened crime, alive, but not yet born into the world. He opened the door leading into the tangled mass of unkempt foliage, dense and dark as a pitchy night could make it, which formed his spacious grounds; and he crept out silently, he knew not why, and took the lonesome track leading to the old Summer-house. If the night was dark, his thoughts were darker still; if the clouds were pitchy black, the thoughts of his soul were of a deeper hue. He sat down in the fearful gloom, and his mind was as a hell opened on earth. Deserted, abandoned, betrayed—oh! was there any vengeance too cruel to be wreaked on this fiend in woman's shape? He would kill her—that was the least he could do. He knew she would be in soon, and he knew well that it was her habit, when she did not find him in his study, to search for him there, where he was seated now. No one in that mysterious household of his—they were too well trained—ever asked him questions; this she-devil for years had been coming and going at all and every hour of the twenty-four,

and habit had silenced all questions as to her entrances and her exits. She had been in his house, often, on certain nights, and had then gone away, without the two other servants knowing when or how, for months at a time; and they had never known whether she was dead or alive, until she had perhaps reappeared just as strangely as she had departed. Why should she not disappear this night also?—and if forever, might he not likewise disappear for ever before anything could be found out?

For there was no longer, independent of his furious thirst for the blood of vengeance, any hope for him, any prospect for him, any chance of his plans succeeding. She had sought to betray all—if she lived, she would seek again to betray all; and he could not hope that she would a second time fail. Yes, he would kill her. There, the moment she should appear, he would fell her to the earth with yon broken iron window-bar, standing free and handy in the sill. That would make her unconscious, and the lancet in his pocket, with just one quiet cut in the femoral artery, would suffice to cause her to bleed to death. But not there should she die—it might

be dangerous; not likely, but still it might. When he had knocked her senseless—and he knew enough of his trade to do that quietly and effectively—he would carry her to a heap of decaying stuff—leaves and rank vegetation that had been putrefying for years in the most remote corner of the grounds; there he could noiselessly, and without the least danger, bleed her to death. Ten minutes' labour would suffice to conceal the body in the heap. Then he would leave by the far gate, go round by the streets home again, and remark on his return that he had seen her well on her way towards The Pines—and who would be a bit wiser? He would spend that night, and the next day, burning his papers, getting his things in order, turning all he could into gold, and the next Cunarder from Liverpool would place the Atlantic between him and the scene of his crime before such a thing as murder was as much as dreamt of.

That was his coolly thought-out plan ; and he stood by the door, the bar in his hand, waiting, waiting, waiting.

## CHAPTER XII.

## LIGHT AND DARKNESS.

M R. MARTIN had been down in the shires having a crack at the long-tails during the three opening days of the season, and, as usual, returned to town in very excellent spirits after his sport. He did not arrive home until the night was far advanced, and, after a stiff glass of hot brandy and water, went to bed without looking over his correspondence, papers, &c., according to his customary habit.

It was late before he got downstairs the following morning, and while at breakfast he commenced to examine the letters which had accumulated in his absence. Amongst the rest there was one from Fitzallan, and when the solicitor had opened it and glanced over the contents, he uttered an execration of astonished disgust, and flung it from him in a passion. It

merely informed him that the writer had determined to have nothing more to say to a property held wrongfully, had sold his commission, and applied the proceeds for the benefit of Miss Wyatt, who should suffer only as little as possible from his personal misfortunes ; and that, while heartily thanking Mr. Martin for the kind and able manner in which he had ever conducted his (Fitzallan's) affairs, the latter had made up his mind that it would be useless and unpleasant to both parties to have any further interviews ; and therefore he bade the solicitor good-bye for ever.

Mr. Martin fairly swore at being thus, for a second time, deceived, or, at least, not treated with entire confidence by his client, and he also swore at what he was pleased to term the insane folly of the same gentleman.

“ Sold out ! ” he cried. “ Surely not, after the exertions I made at the War Office to prevent his making such a fool of himself. And, if he’s not gazetted, there may yet be time to prevent him taking such a mad step.”

He had not seen the *Times* when in the country, as he had been far too busy over his

sport to even skim through the daily papers, and now he flew into his office to hunt up the back numbers. He was very soon satisfied. On turning to the last extract from the *Gazette*, he found his client's name as having "retired from the service by the sale of his commission," and then, indeed, Mr. Martin knew that all was over as concerned the Fitzallan property. Still it seemed absolutely essential that he should once again meet the chief performer in this drama of real life, and Mr. Martin made up his mind at once to run over to Dublin by that night's mail, and insist on seeing Fitzallan, so that his affairs should be properly and formally wound up.

On his arrival at the barracks he was met with the astounding news that his client had gone away without leaving any address, and was further informed by the Adjutant that no one was likely to have any idea even of his whereabouts, unless it was the Paultons, who were believed to be somewhat in Fitzallan's confidence. But neither Maria nor Jack could add in the least to Mr. Martin's information on the point, and indeed the former spoke most hopelessly of the absent man, declaring her belief that he had

taken the most deliberate and cautious measures to preserve his incognito, and to hinder any further intrusion. Honest Jack corroborated his wife's view of the case, and Mr. Martin returned to his hotel confessing himself completely baffled.

In the afternoon he received a telegram from his confidential clerk, to the effect that the solicitors of Mr. Belmore had called to make a most important communication regarding the Fitzallan property, and that Mr. Martin was earnestly requested to return at once to London and favour them with a personal interview. He wired a reply, telling his clerk to arrange a meeting, at his own office, for three o'clock the next day; and, at the time named, Mr. Martin was there—calm and cool, certainly, but entirely devoid of confidence in his client's case—to meet the solicitors on the other side, and act as events might dictate.

Only one of them came, a Mr. Carling, of the old school of family lawyers; and he opened the business at once with a frankness and decision which satisfied Mr. Martin that his opponent had mastered the whole circumstances of the

case just as effectually as he had himself, and that really it was one past defence. In fact, Mr. Martin very speedily arrived at the conclusion that the wisest course to adopt would be—to use a vulgar but expressive phrase—to “put their horses together,” for by that means the generosity of Mr. Belmore might be excited, and something set aside for the benefit of the unfortunate victim to General Fitzallan’s folly in making a will that could not stand the slightest opposition.

Accordingly he told all he knew of the birth, training, and further career of the young man ; of the circumstances under which he had come into possession of the property ; of the manner in which he had used it ; and, finally, of the fact that, whether or not the other side were intending to break the will, young Fitzallan had himself abandoned all title to, or right in, the estate, by selling out of the army.

“ That is so,” said Mr. Carling ; “ but even if he had not taken that step, we were quite prepared to upset the will, for, from the close inquiries we have made, we find that it would be the simplest matter in the world to prove his

*real* parentage—to prove him the legitimate son, born in lawful wedlock, of De Courcey Calverley and Esther Wyatt—therefore he is not Henry Roberts, to whom all was left, and therefore the will is not worth the sheets it's written on."

"Quite so," returned the other; "there is no getting over those facts of which I have, in the course of my inquiries, and unknown to my client, come lately into full possession; but, if you will pardon a curiosity perhaps a little unprofessional—but, as the case is undefended, excusable—may I ask how you arrived at the truth of this matter?"

The old solicitor smiled. He knew that Mr. Martin could not but be pained at being beaten on his side of the case, though of course there was no blame whatever attachable to him, and Mr. Carling quite understood his anxiety to know the nature of the weapons by which he had been worsted.

"Well," he replied, "as Mr. Belmore—the most careless man, sir, in the whole world, if our experience goes for aught—gave us *carte blanche*, we preferred to take our own methods

of getting at the truth, in preference to those suggested by that blackguard Creasey—ahem ! but he *is* a real blackguard——”

“ Sir,” interrupted Mr. Martin, emphatically, “he is one of the most atrocious scoundrels of the day, and if you will help me—for I could not do it without your valuable assistance—I fully intend to prosecute him for extorting money from Captain Fitzallan.”

“ We will talk of that afterwards. I *will* help you, sir. But to resume—we preferred to use our own methods, and only took such hints from Creasey as put us well on the track. We then placed the whole affair in the hands of a most clever and, professionally speaking, rising young man, Mr. Ernest Clarke, and, strangely enough, we found he was already in possession of the leading incidents of the whole story, and had been actually engaged by the very Colonel De Courcey Calverley to investigate the affair on behalf of the latter. Clarke had readily got hold of a shameless old man—a disgrace, sir, to his cloth and to his church—Mr. Cupper by name, who had secretly married the Colonel (then an unfledged griffin) and this Miss

Wyatt—who seems a most extraordinary and even unnatural character—and, by means of alternate threats and bribes, soon learned that Creasey was at the bottom of the whole, and was again seeking to extort money by playing one side off against the other. Cupper also put him in possession of the names and addresses of all the persons alive who could throw any light upon the strange circumstances—for instance, the woman Smythe; Steadman, an honest hotel-keeper, and a most valuable witness, even if a very cautious one, who had been present at the secret wedding and was afterwards employed by General (then Colonel) Fitzallan, to arrange all about supporting and caring for the offspring of the marriage, when everything was broken off between the two principals and they had agreed to separate; with Major Kavanagh, now on his way home from the West Indies, and his wife, who could both give the strongest corroborative, though not exactly direct, evidence; and with the few other persons still alive, and in possession of the facts. Having secured this Mr. Cupper, the rest was all plain-sailing, and, as you must be quite well aware,

Mr. Martin, your client has absolutely no defence whatever when we propose to break the will."

"None whatever," repeated the other, with a half-laughable air of regret; "but, may I ask, did your people communicate at all with Colonel Calverley as to what you had found out?"

"We did not. It was no business of ours; nor can we imagine why he should make inquiries into an affair that, no matter how it turned out, could not possibly redound to his credit. It is evident he grossly deceived this Miss Wyatt, representing himself as a man of large property, whereas he had nothing but a load of debts; and his desertion of her; his forcing her, so to speak, to separate from him; his heartlessness in never once, as it would appear, (and we can hear nothing to the contrary,) inquiring after the child, *his* child, or what had become of it; with a score of other shocking circumstances—such, for one example out of a hundred, as his shameless conduct regarding the woman Smythe—all these things stamp the man as an abominably selfish and brutal

type of humanity ; and we are at a loss to know, as I said before, why *he* should have now troubled himself to make inquiries."

"Probably the exposure of what was then thought to be the truth regarding my client, startled the Colonel as much as anything else ; he may have really—such is often the way with thoroughly bad and selfish men—forgotten most of the circumstances, and caused inquiry to be made to satisfy his curiosity."

"And, Mr. Martin, do you think he will *now* acknowledge this young man as his son ?"

"It matters not a jot whether he does or not. He has little or no money to leave ; and, besides, I don't entertain the slightest hopes of my client again putting in an appearance. He knows that Calverley is his father—at least, he supposes that to be the fact—but he does *not* know that he was born in lawful wedlock, that Esther Wyatt was his mother, and that he *is* no longer the nameless wretch he had been led to believe. He's gone, and I'm very much mistaken if we hear from him again—'gone under,' as the Yankees say—'gone under, and left no splash.' "

"But surely, having behaved so nobly in giving up to his unknown mother, without the slightest legal necessity for doing so, every farthing the unfortunate fellow could raise on what—we have made that point certain—was undoubtedly his own, his commission, surely he would leave his address, or some intimation of his whereabouts, with her?"

"I do not think so," said the other, moodily; "it looks to me like a decided case of determined melancholy—utter despair of everything, as one may say—and though he has behaved towards this Miss Wyatt, or Mrs. Calverley, I suppose we should say, with the most uncalled-for generosity, I think it is exceedingly unlikely that he would seek an interview with her, or even hint at his probable place of abode. A man behaving so nobly as he has done, would be the very last, in my opinion, to seek for thanks, gratitude, and all that sort of thing—would, on the other hand, take every means to avoid such. No, sir, I'm afraid he has gone for good, and if we ever hear of or see him again, it will be more by accident than design—at least, on his part."

"But surely he must have told the lady what he was doing for her?"

"I think not. But has not this Mr. Clarke seen her when getting up the case?"

"No; he feared to see her, and we think he was right. She was represented to us as a most extraordinary person—hardly, to my mind, to be placed in the category of reasonable beings—and we thought it wise not to communicate with her at all, until and unless we absolutely wanted her."

"Perhaps you were right—perhaps you were right; but I think—eh, Mr. Carling?—that the time has now arrived when all should be told to her—I mean all about her son."

"I think so too; nor am I of your opinion about her not having any idea as to his whereabouts. At all events, it will be no harm to ask her."

"We *might* telegraph her to come here," remarked Mr. Martin, dubiously. "As you say, it will do no harm, and may clear some points up. We can only try."

A telegram, very craftily worded, so as to excite Esther's curiosity without rousing her

suspicions, was then despatched by Mr. Martin to The Pines, and the answer paid for. The reply came sooner than was expected. It was in the affirmative, and announced that the lady would present herself at Mr. Martin's office the next day at noon exactly.

In the interval between the despatch of the message and the receipt of the answer, the two solicitors continued to discuss the strange case in the whole of its bearings, and finally they decided to prosecute Creasey, if they could get evidence against him sufficiently strong without using Maggie Smythe; but if they found that impossible, then they would turn her into a Crown witness, and punish the leading scoundrel of the piece, even at the expense of letting the second one go scot free.

"Really, however," said Mr. Martin—"really it is not Creasey who has done all the mischief, but those cursed meddlers, Mr. and Mrs. Wrigley."

"Ah! by-the-by, I wanted to ask about that precious couple. Mr. Clarke reported that the man was nearly dead with fright when he was told the extraordinary turn things had taken,

but that the—the—I can hardly call her a lady—the woman brazened it all out, and declared she was an ‘instrument in the hands of the Lord for the chastisement of the wicked.’ Did you ever hear such horrid stuff?”

“I can well believe it; they are most despicable characters, and they cover their loathsome maliciousness under a cloak of sham religion that verges on the blasphemous, if it is not actually blasphemy itself. But for their venomous tongues, their bitter spite, and their wicked inquisitiveness, which seemed absolutely to grow visibly wickeder and more bitter as one day succeeded the other, every bit of this would have been avoided, and my client would——”

“Still hold a property that did not belong to him—eh, Mr. Martin ?” interrupted the other old man of the law, with a sly smile.

“True, true; but it *was* all their doing, and they did it from mere passion, and not from any love of justice, as they now intimate. But I am glad the fellow is suffering from his fright. What does he fear, though ?”

“Oh ! anything and everything. Clarke got

all he wanted out of him by holding all sorts of terrors over his head—in fact—it's a good joke—and besides, it served the fellow right—in fact, this Wrigley was placed in such dread of Colonel Calverley, as well as of Fitzallan, that he sent in his papers of retirement without even his wife knowing it, and I quite expected to see him gazetted out before now. In the meantime, he has got leave until his commission is sold, and he has taken her off to vegetate in France on the miserable pittance they are possessed of."

"Capital!" cried Mr. Martin. "By Jupiter! won't there be a row when she discovers that he has sold out? It'll take a lot of praying and quoting from the Bible to make up for *that* little step on the part of Monsieur Wrigley."

And the two lawyers laughed heartily over the discomfiture of the prime mischief-makers in the Fitzallan case.

"There is one point," said Mr. Martin, after they had enjoyed what to them seemed a good joke, "on which I am not *quite* clear—how came that Indian parson——"

"Cupper?"

"No, the other fellow that's out there still."

"Burdin?"

"Ay, Mr. Burdin. How came he to give that certificate of baptism, and to write that letter, saying the poor young fellow was really the son of the felon Smythe?"

"Pooh! Burdin was little better than a silly boy, just out from England, and he quite believed all that his superior, Cupper, and that foolish old Fitzallan told him. He undoubtedly thought, as Mrs. Birt (so far as she knew anything), and all of them thought, that it was Maggie Smythe's child they were dealing with. Even the lawyers were deceived on the point; and, in fact, beyond the criminal parents themselves, there were only six persons who really knew that instead of Maggie Smythe being confined of twins, one of the babies—the other having died almost immediately—was really the child of Mr. and Mrs. Calverley."

"That was what I believed. But how did you get at it?"

"Easily enough, through Tom Steadman, Cupper, and two of the regimental hospital attendants, both now enjoying pensions in India.

We have the detailed proofs as clear as daylight ; and I may add, Mr. Martin, that, if you are not satisfied on the point, we can lay before you overwhelming documentary as well as oral evidence, and can——”

“Not at all, not at all, my dear sir—I am satisfied, perfectly satisfied ; and there is no occasion for going into the matter further.”

Soon afterwards the pair separated, and Mr. Martin made up his mind that he would never again have anything to say to a case unless he was perfectly, and beyond all doubt whatsoever, satisfied that his client had put him in the fullest possession of all details.

Esther Wyatt, as we may, for convenience sake, still continue to call her, presented herself punctually at the appointed hour in Mr. Martin’s office, and was at once shown into the private room, where the two lawyers were once again together. She appeared to be cruelly wasted and worn, but there was a determined look about the hard lines of the mouth, as of one equally without hope, without fear, and without any affections or sympathies with the

rest of her kind. She took a seat in silence, and waited for those who had summoned her into their presence to announce their business. Mr. Martin commenced with some common-places, but was sternly checked by Miss Wyatt with the remark that she had little time to spare, and would be glad if he would say what he had to say and let her go. Thus driven into a corner, the solicitor plunged *in medias res*, without further delay, and asked her if she was aware that Captain Fitzallan had disappeared, that he had forfeited the property he had formerly held, and that in consequence she was no longer in possession of the annuity which had been left to her by the General, whose child she had cared for until the sad days when the small-pox had carried off the last heir of the Fitzallans in direct descent.

She shuddered violently, as does one whose nervous system has received another of a long-continued series of shocks; then she recovered herself, and said,

“I am not so much surprised, after what I have heard, that Captain—Captain Fitzallan ~~has~~ gone; but surely, surely, gentlemen, there will be something left to him?”

“Nothing—ahem!—Miss Wyatt. He forfeits all, in more ways than one. I presume, of course, that you are aware we know now of all the strange circumstances of his birth, &c.—in fact, of his connection with yourself?”

“I am prepared to know that all the circumstances have come to light,” she answered, with a deadly calmness; “but what of it?”

“This much, amongst the rest, that you are left penniless,” said Mr. Martin.

“I suppose I can starve as well as anyone else,” she replied, with an hysterical laugh. “I am well used to mental misery—physical suffering can be nothing in comparison.”

“But, Miss Wyatt—I presume you still prefer to be addressed by that name?”

“I prefer that name,” she stolidly answered; “though it is evident you know my real designation.”

“Ahem! yes,” resumed Mr. Carling; “but you must be told that this unfortunate young man, this Captain Fitzallan, your son”—(again did the miserable woman shudder violently)—“he has performed a most noble act in your regard. He has not the faintest idea that you

are in any way connected with him, much less that you are his mother ; and yet he has sold his commission, and has applied the results to you."

" My Lord ! *what is it you say ?*" screamed the woman, bursting forward from her seat, her eyes wild, and her hands clutching the air convulsively.

" He has invested the money in your name, and on the first quarter-day you will be notified of the fact in the regular way."

" Invested it for *me* ? For his mother who deserted him, who drove him from her breast, who would have killed him if she could ! Oh ! man, man, do not tell me such a fearful thing ! —do not drive me mad with such terrible tales !"

" Pardon me, Miss Wyatt," said the lawyer, going forward and taking the hand of the excited woman, as she leant forward over the table in the intensity of her pain. " Pardon me —sit down—but this I tell you is the simple truth ; he has given up his last farthing for you, and he has gone without knowing you are his mother. Can you not tell us *where* he is gone ?"

But the woman, whom he had forced once more into her seat, only moaned out in her anguish as if her heart would break ; for this crushing vengeance of mercy for one, herself, the most inhumanly merciless, was more than she could bear ; and they left her alone with her agony, for they knew that it was past all power of consolation.

In less than half an hour this abnormally constituted creature succeeded in conquering, after a fashion, her own self yet again ; and she went to the door of the private room, and once more summoned the two lawyers. She was strangely calm—it was the calm of fixed determination. The veil that for so many weary (ah ! how weary, and how miserably sinful !), dreary years had clouded her understanding, and poisoned her heart, had fallen away for ever ; and, with an unspeakable anguish, came to her the thought of her inhumanly cruel conduct to her offspring, of her darkness to the better side of nature, of her terrible sin that had forced her to fly in the face of her Creator Himself, of her monstrous abandonment of the babe of her womb ; and now, in one brief half-hour, all had changed—the

woman had repented, the mother had come to experience something of that naturalness she should have felt at the first, and she had made up her mind to search to the ends of the earth for that son who had—unwittingly though it was—revenged himself for his mother's brutality with a noble generosity that could not be equalled.

She poured all this, and much more, out on their astonished ears with an eagerness almost painful to witness ; and yet, with all the remorse and all the misery it brought, there was mixed up a fixed resolution of vengeance on those who had driven her son to do the very deed which brought her back to humanity. She told all—and it was not so very much—she knew of Creasey, and of Maggie Smythe ; and she begged and prayed, and implored on her knees, that instant measures should be taken to arrest them both for the conspiracy by which they (certainly the former, if not the latter) had extorted money from her son, and driven him to exile and shame. Her whole life-long habit of mind had changed, and now she was just as anxious for full publicity of all she had done in the past

as before she had been desirous of burying it for ever from all human knowledge.

Both the lawyers jumped at the idea of obtaining her assistance to prosecute this Creasey who had been robbing her for years, and they agreed to start from Paddington by the very next train, certain, from what Esther told them, that they should find the precious pair together, though possibly just on the eve of flight. There was an hour and a half to spare, and they occupied the time in obtaining from the wretched mother herself the fullest confirmation of the facts regarding her son's birth and career, of which they were already in possession.

"There is just one thing I do not understand," said Mr. Carling, when Esther had made a clean breast of what, only a few hours before, she thought no power in heaven or earth could drag from her:—"just one point you can perhaps explain. Why was this woman Smythe always so bitter against your—ahem!—against Colonel Calverley?"

"Why?" cried she, with her great eyes again flashing with hate at the memories crowding on her, memories of hate for the man who had foully

distorted her whole life with lies and villainy. “Why? Because he treated her, merciless scoundrel that he was, and *is*, as he treated scores of others. Wrong she did not mind then no more than she does now, but she *did*, in those days, mind public shame, and he shamed her so fearfully before all that she had to leave the regiment.”

“It was then, I presume,” asked Mr. Martin, “that you took her into your service?”

“Shortly afterwards. I feared her tongue, and so I bought her, as it were, to hide for ever all traces of a connection I loathed, and dreaded even to think of; and she swore to me that she would say no more of the wrong Calverley had done her, lest it should draw attention once more to *me*.”

“But she did not know your son was alive?”

“He was reported dead, after a battle in the Mutiny, and I—oh! can Heaven forgive me for having wished it was true?—I showed her the death-report in the paper. I kept from her, as from Creasey, the denial of it.”

Soon afterwards it became time for their journey, and the three started for Chorlbury.

The train by which they travelled was a slow one, and it was late in the evening when they reached their destination. The lawyers had agreed that there was ample evidence to bear them out in giving Creasey, and Maggie too, into custody, even without the evidence of Esther ; and accordingly the first thing they did was to drive to the police-station and secure the services of a couple of policemen. The five then proceeded to Dr. Creasey's abode, and were speedily admitted by the frightened maid-servant, whose instinct seemed to tell her that there must be something wrong, or else why this *posse* of visitors ?

“ Where is Dr. Creasey ? ” demanded Mr. Martin, in his sternest tones.

“ I don't know, sir,” was the trembling reply : “ He may be in there ; ” and the girl pointed to the study-door.

“ And where is Mrs. Smythe, my girl ? ” asked Mr. Carling, more kindly, for he saw she was a mere innocent domestic.

“ She went in there, sir, too.”

“ How long ago ? ”

“ Oh, just now—not five minutes ago, I think, sir.”

Without more ado the whole party went into the doctor's *sanctum*. It was empty, but the door leading into the profound darkness of the grounds without was wide open. A woman's bonnet and shawl were lying, carelessly flung down, on the table. Esther Wyatt recognised them as belonging to Maggie Smythe.

"Stay a moment!" cried one of the constables. "Keep back from the front of the light, or you might be seen from the garden. There's another gate, and if the doctor's done this job you charge on him, he'll be off that way. I'll send a man round to stop it."

They all drew back into the hall; the policeman went out again into the street, and in a few moments returned, saying that he had despatched the two constables of the beat round to blockade the bottom entrance to the garden.

"And now," he went on, "it will be only sensible to have a light."

He applied a match to his bull's-eye lantern, which he then returned to its place under his great-coat, and they all passed through the study and out into the tangled brake which lay

before them—pitchy as a dark night could make it, black as hell itself. But though they moved cautiously, it was imposssible to avoid noise in stumbling their way through the intense darkness ; and the crackling of rotten sticks, it became certain, would alone betray their presence to anyone not absolutely deaf. Suddenly they heard a sound as of some one dashing at headlong speed through the dense foliage, in the direction leading from the party, and with a loud cry the two policemen started in pursuit ; the others remained still, waiting the result with beating hearts.

A door was heard to open violently, fierce execrations broke the stillness of the night—a brief struggle in the road at the further end—and Creasey lay on his back handcuffed, while the four policemen stood over him, panting with their exertions.

“Set him up and search him,” ordered the senior, as the light was turned on the prisoner.

In a second a six-barrelled revolver, loaded and capped, was pulled out of his breast-pocket, and, that being secured, there was no further careful quest made.

"I suppose you know what we want you for?" asked the same officer.

But the man said never a word; only he foamed at the mouth, glanced wildly up the garden, and his teeth bit through his under-lip till the blood rushed forth. Then they marched him up to the little party formed by Esther and the two lawyers, and Mr. Martin at once asked,

"But the woman—where's the woman?"

"Ay, where's the woman?" cried the constable, sharply, turning the bull's-eye full on the face of the prisoner; "she was traced here, you know, not a quarter of an hour ago. Where is she?"

But still he spoke never a word, and only staggered heavily, as though he were drunk.

"My Lord! if he has killed her!" The low, hissing sounds seemed to come by instinct from the lips of Esther Wyatt, and all present started at the sound of their deadly vehemence.

Creasey said nothing, but he stumbled forward again, and it seemed as if he would have fallen had not the policemen held him up.

"Set him down, Jim, on that log, and you stay beside him—there's more'n this than we think for, gents all, and madam—an' we

must find that woman, however it may be."

They placed the seemingly powerless prisoner on the ground, and all but the man Jim went straight back to the lower gate, so as to pick up the trail left by Creasey in the rush he had made for the only way of exit he had thought was open to him. They were longer about it than seemed at all reasonable; and Jim, who knew nothing of the rank and obstructive wildness of the impeding foliage, mentally denounced them as bunglers, while he watched their single light bobbing to and fro, now seen, now gone, now held high up in the air, anon sunk down almost to the earth. Nor was he disturbed in his speculations on their movements by his manacled prisoner—the doctor crouched on the grass where he had been set, with his head hanging down on his hands which rested on his knees, while he gave no sign of life or consciousness.

"Dear, dear me, what a pack of duffers they must be, surelie!" said Jim to himself; "it's fifteen minutes if it's one since they left this, an' they haven't got half way round this blessed gloomy hole yet. Hallo, mate!" he cried, as his prisoner, with a low groan, fell sideways

and very heavily on the grass, "what's up now? Speak, man?"

But still never a word did the doctor say; and when the policeman, in some alarm, stooped to raise the head, his hands were instantly soaked in something wet and thick, and he cried out for help at the top of his voice. Almost simultaneously came a shout of horror from the other party; and the piercing scream of a woman, overmastering the other sounds, was terrible in its import.

They had found Maggie Smythe lying on a heap of decaying vegetation, her skull fractured by a single blow, and quite dead. And Esther Wyatt lay over the body, senseless as the corpse, the sight of which had so stunned her.

When the policemen heard the shouts of their comrade for help, two of them—one with a second lantern now lighted—ran speedily up to him, and when they turned the bull's-eye on the prisoner, they saw that his face was lying in a huge pool of blood. They raised his head, the jugular vein was cut, evidently by the lancet the fingers still clutched, and the man was dying, if not already dead. They sought to

staunch the blood, but their efforts were abortive, and it was a corpse they carried into the study, not the living Dr. Creasey they had come to search for. It was conjectured that the murder was committed in revenge for the betrayal of the doctor's schemes by Maggie Smythe; and that he was about hiding the body when disturbed by the arrival of the party who had sought him, without any idea that, villain as he was, they would find him also a murderer. His suicide was evidently quite a sudden thought, when he knew that all must be discovered; and it was carried out with a silent determination quite in keeping with the man's whole character. When seated on the ground, it was supposed, he had been able to get at the lancet—so discreditably overlooked in the hasty search of their prisoner made by the police—open it, in spite of his manacled hands, and sever the jugular vein without so much as a single cry of pain. At all events such was the opinion formed by the jury who served at the double inquest, and their verdict set forth in full that Maggie Smythe had been murdered by Doctor Creasey, and that the latter had then committed *felo-de-se*.

The papers of the dead man were, of course, carefully examined by the lawyers engaged on both sides of the Fitzallan will case, and it became plainly apparent that the deceased miscreant had been long in possession of the full facts regarding the young captain of "The Eagles;" but it was a matter of considerable doubt if he had known *all* at the time when he extorted from the latter the five thousand pounds, under threats of exposing his ignoble birth.

The shock had such a fearful effect on the unhappy Esther as to bring on a brain-fever; and while she lay hovering between life and death, the only nurse who tended her was her niece, Maria Paulton.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE INQUEST, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

THE Chorlbury coroner was an official far above the usual intellectual average of such personages, and he ever made his inquests real inquiries into the *cause* of death of the persons on whom he was called to officiate. He was by no means the man to allow "family reasons," so potent in some quarters, to stifle investigation, and any attempt of that nature he resented with all his power.

In the case of the deaths by violence of the wretched victim of her own vile passions, Maggie Smythe, and of the scoundrel Creasey, Mr. Martin and Mr. Carling, true to their instincts as family solicitors, were most anxious to have the inquest heard *in camera* as much as possible, and exerted themselves to the utmost to hush the affair up, in so far as regarded what they con-

sidered to be the interests of their clients. But the coroner would not hear of any such conduct, and after the first formal sitting, during which he elicited sufficient information to connect Captain Fitzallan with the tragedy, he adjourned his court until that ex-officer should be found or produced as the most material witness. The local Press also managed at once to get hold of the true bearing of events, and, it being "the silly season," manufactured such an amount of sensational capital out of it, that the London papers, also hard-up for matter, transferred the details in full to their columns, and the greatest amount of publicity was given to all the circumstances. Before the week was out the whole country was ringing with the affair; it was speedily copied into the French journals; and Captain Fitzallan, who had not got further than Paris—whence he fully intended to make his way to Naples, to catch one last glance of the idol of his heart previous to his embarkation for America—read a washed-out account of the murder and suicide, and at once placed himself in renewed communication with Mr. Martin.

He felt that simple justice called upon him to

adopt that course ; and—excruciatingly painful as it was for him to take such a step, thus again placing himself in the full glare of the public eye—his conscience, which of late had been regaining its former influence over his moral nature, told him that he had no choice in the matter, and he obeyed its dictates. The old solicitor, half sorry that he should have been baffled by a mere coroner, half glad that he had again got hold of a client in whom, in spite of his faults, he took a strange and uncommonly strong interest, reported the discovery of the witness to the first-named official, and Fitzallan, as he continued to call himself, received an intimation that his immediate presence in Chorlbury was most desirable. The young man—bowed down, broken, deadened by the cruel mental agony he had gone through, and was still writhing under—had been so far purified by bitter suffering, that his mental eyes were opening to higher, broader, deeper views of things as regarded other persons in preference to himself, and coming to appreciate the true nobility of doing his duty, howsoever unpleasant it might be, he forthwith obeyed the summons,

and presented himself once more in Chorlbury.

The pain of the effort was exceedingly great, but if there was sorrow at witnessing old scenes of past happiness gone for ever; if there was a torturing shame at being made the principal remaining character in such a horrid tragedy as that which had been enacted; if there was a mental agony nearly insupportable in having all the most delicate events of his life, both early and late, ripped up for the delectation of a morbid public—there was also a compensation to be found in the full consciousness that he was doing what was only just and proper, and he found much interior comfort from the mere fact of performing that duty. The whole business as between himself and Creasey and Maggie Smythe—so far as Fitzallan knew about the doings of that abandoned woman, who had passed herself off as his mother to aid in the plan of extortion—was gone into as freely as possible; and much valuable information, as even Mr. Martin and Mr. Carling now acknowledged, was gathered from the papers, diaries, &c., of the deceased doctor, and from the rude memoranda, barely legible to the ordinary

reader, which were found hidden away in the boxes and private drawers of Maggie Smythe.

With most of the details of the plot—or two plots, rather—against Fitzallan, the reader is already familiar, or can readily guess at from what has gone before; and it is almost needless to add that the guilt of both the deceased towards that officer, and subsequently towards one another, was fully established; and there was not left a shadow of doubt hanging over the fact that Maggie was about to betray Creasey, in revenge for his treatment of her; and that the latter, fully aware that his latest plot had completely failed owing to the indifference of both Mr. Belmore and the actual holder of the property, had foully murdered the woman in the desperation of his crime, and then, when detected, had committed suicide.

It was also shown, at a very early stage in the proceedings, that the miserable old drunkard, Padre Cupper, had, like the other two, been treacherous even to his chosen accomplices, and had, thanks to the efforts of the indefatigable Mr. Ernest Clarke, long ago been aiding the efforts of Colonel de Courcey Calver-

ley to obtain the exact particulars of the entire history of the offspring of the miserable, mutually-deceitful marriage between the Colonel and Esther Wyatt. The degraded old minister had not, however, in any open way committed himself so as to render a prosecution necessary, or even desirable, and he was dismissed from the witness-box, to slink back to his den by "The Jolly Bargee," where he died a month or two afterwards, in the greatest misery and privation, and was buried by the parish.

During the whole of the long and protracted inquiry, Fitzallan had been suffering terrible torture, but, as is frequently the case, it had positively done him good. It had awakened him from the dull torpor into which he had fallen after the first shock of the events of the previous Autumn at Dumore Castle; and with that awakening came more wholesome views of life. The rude tearing asunder of the veil under which he sought to hide himself from public gaze had also a decidedly beneficial effect, and the young man began dimly to think that, though he could never hope to gain back the love that was lost to him, he had still no

right to cut himself asunder from the whole human race by leading a life of melancholy and self-preying obscurity, such as he had proposed to himself in the darkest days of his great sorrow. And when, the inquest over, he returned with Mr. Martin to London, and in the calm and quiet of that gentleman's study learned for the first time that his mother still lived in the person of Esther Wyatt—the Coroner on that point had been gracious, and no public mention of her name, or of Lady Clara Burton, had been allowed—the idea came to him, and took forcible possession of his mind, that new duties had arisen for him to fulfil, and that to shirk their performance would be as unmanly as it would be contrary to the new-born, or rather, newly-awakened code of morals daily gaining strength in his bosom.

Not that he could ever forget—he thought he might in time come to forgive it—his mother's horrible desertion of him from the hour of his birth until circumstances, which she sought to subdue rather than to encourage, had again forced him in his exultant manhood on her notice; he *could* not forget that cruelty,

no matter how hard he might strive, but he felt that her wrong in his regard should not be met by a second wrong on his part; and though he was fully aware of the impossibility of ever loving or respecting her as a mother, he determined that while life lasted he would work for her, and support her in the poverty into which she was presently thrown to a great extent in consequence of his deed. And he did more than make a mere vague resolution. He returned to Chorlbury yet again, and he performed what was in truth and deed the most painful self-imposed action of his entire life, by forcing himself to visit her, lying raving in the delirium of her fever, at The Pines, where he learned from Maria Paulton that his name was hardly ever off the lips of the miserable woman, but that she seemed to confound him with the General Fitzallan in whose service she had been, and for whom—there was now no doubt on the point—she had entertained a sincere love, that had only been interrupted, not quenched, by the miserable episode of her acquaintance with and secret marriage to Calverley, during Fitzallan's absence on frontier duty.

But he could do nothing for her. The ravaging, writhing thing they still called Miss Esther Wyatt knew him no more than she knew anyone else, and it was very doubtful if she would ever again regain her consciousness, or the use of those senses which she had so foully abused by giving way, in the hot days of her youth as in the maturity of her womanhood, to the terrible passions which seemed to form the great strength of her perverted nature. He could only gaze on the wreck that lay tossing before his eyes on a bed that seemed likely to be the bed of death, and pray that the chance might be given her, his mother, to become conscious before her last hour, and make her peace with that God against whose merciful decrees nearly the whole of her life had been spent in battle.

Before he returned to London, where he determined to seek out some means of obtaining a livelihood for his mother and himself, in case death did not indeed claim her for its own, he had many a conversation with Maria Paulton, and that young lady was delighted to find in her cousin such a change for the better as she had hardly ever expected to see. He appeared to

her like one from the dead restored to life ; but when she attempted to tap the root of the overwhelming sorrow that had caused him such intense anguish—to wit, his relations with Lady Clara Burton—she found that, though the wound was indeed skinned over, its poison had eaten so deeply into his system that a permanent cure seemed almost past hope. He loved the girl to distraction, to madness, whenever he allowed himself to think of the ineffable sweetness that had once been the sun of his life ; but the love was the love of despair, and the very intensity of what it had been precluded the possibility of permanent relief.

Very delicately, and yet very firmly, did Mrs. Paulton point out to him that, probably, if the case was now put before Lady Clara in its proper bearings, if the whole truth was told her, if his grievous faults in the matter were shown to be errors of judgment rather than of intention; if it was proved to her, as Maria was convinced it could be proved, that he had been blinded and maddened by passion, as well as by the extraordinary circumstances of which he had been made the almost unconscious victim ;

if the criminality of his father, her so-called uncle, could be laid before her in full—the criminality of keeping from her the fact that her lover was, as the old man knew long ago now, in truth of gentle birth, and even, as Calverley's son, a distant relative of her own—Maria urged that, if all the sethings were plainly set out for the calm judgment of the girl, their truth would prevail, and she would at once take back to her heart of hearts the love that could never die out from within her. But he could by no means be brought to accept that view, and he had two answers impossible to be gainsaid : How could he hope to restore himself to her favour, even with the most complete self-abasement, by incriminating his own father and the cherished, adopted parent of LadyClara herself?—and, How could he dare to reopen the well of her grief (for he *knew* she grieved almost as much as he did), when he had no means, not one single farthing in the world, to support himself, much less her and his mother likewise ?

And Maria Paulton could only turn away with a sigh, and acknowledge that the difficulties were almost insurmountable ; and though,

woman-like, she still hoped against hope, there was left in her kindly heart an aching void to think that she could not by any means compass the happiness of this new-found cousin, in whom she took such a tender interest.

Presently he went back to London, and there began that wearying, maddening search for work which breaks down so many strong men ; chills their hearts into an almost complete disbelief in the axiom that those who can and will work, need not seek in vain for a means of earning their bread ; and drives, sometimes, even the best and the bravest into the dark despair, which means either lunacy or death. Not that he was in positive want. The small provision that he had set aside for his emigration to America, after he should have taken a last distant and heart-breaking glance at Lady Clara, had been but very little broken in upon ; and since the great crash of his woe had come he had fallen into habits that were niggardly, because he had no thought for anything beyond the passing wants of a body scarcely conscious of its own existence. But now there was the future to be looked forward to, and it loomed very dark. The re-

sults of the sale of his commission secured his mother from absolute want as long as she lived; but he would do for her—he felt he *must* do for her—much more than that, or he would be wanting in his duty, and the thought of how his intention was to be carried out pressed him sorely. He could see no prospect of supporting himself even; how could he, then, add to her comforts? No one would have anything to say to him: he seemed totally unfit for anything: and he was laughed to scorn when he applied for situations for which he knew he was well fitted, and had to declare that his “last employment” was that of an officer in the Army.

So some two months passed away, and he began to see—more especially as his mother, so Maria wrote, began to show signs of mending—that his first-formed plan was the best, and that he would have to seek on the other side of the Atlantic for that remunerative labour which was denied him in his own country. In every way it would be better. He could not live with a mother who had behaved so unnaturally as his had; to do so would be but to torture both; and, having made up his mind to take speedy

passage to America, he was one morning just about to step down to Mr. Martin's office to communicate his intention, when he received a note from that gentleman inviting him to attend there at noon the same day, but without giving any reason for the meeting.

"We asked you to come down, Captain Fitz-allan," said Mr. Martin, with whom was Mr. Carling, and a strange, eccentric-looking gentleman, whom Fitz did not know—"we have sent for you on most important business—pray take a chair; yes, there, thank you—yes, most important business connected with the—ahem!—property."

"The property! What property?" Fitz asked, with an uncomfortable sensation of a surprise that he had thought was long since dead in him.

"The Fitzallan property, sir," put in Mr. Carling, taking up the ball, "the property which you have forfeited—"

"If I have forfeited it, as of course I have, what more have I to do with it?"

"A great deal—a great deal!" blurted out the stranger, hurriedly; and then he broke off,

as though startled at the sound of his own voice, and subsided.

"Yes, a great deal, my dear sir," said Mr. Martin, "happily a very great deal——"

His professional brother interrupted him:

"There must be a suit, sir, a friendly suit. The fact is, Captain Fitzallan——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Carling," interrupted the other solicitor; "but perhaps I can explain it better to my client."

"Be it so," answered Mr. Carling: "be it so. I think the whole affair is very ill-advised, or at least premature."

He helped himself to a pinch of snuff, and looked a very martyr of resignation.

"No, sir! no, sir!" put in the stranger. "Well-advised—*well-advised*." And again he subsided, and sucked a quaint gold-knobbed bamboo he carried.

Mr. Martin waved his hand in deprecation of further interruption, the while Fitzallan sat in mute wonderment at the whole scene, and was no little disturbed to notice that the strange gentleman was eyeing him with an eager curiosity that was unpleasant, to say the least of it.

Then Mr. Martin plunged *in medias res*, and explained that the report of the inquest, and all that had come out thereat, had somehow fallen into the hands of the heir to the property, Mr. Belmore, whom he begged to introduce.

The stranger bobbed up from his seat, crossed over and shook the hand of the young officer without a word, and then back again to his seat, where he plumped down as if an unpleasant job were accomplished.

Mr. Martin went on, almost without a pause. He said Mr. Belmore having read that report when travelling in Sicily——

“Wrong, sir, wrong, sir—Calabria.”

“In Calabria, then. Mr. Belmore was struck with the extraordinary circumstances, and decided on at once returning to London——”

“Wrong, sir, wrong, sir—Naples.”

“Pray do not interrupt me, Mr. Belmore,” said Mr. Martin, testily—“at all events, he got to London, for he is here, and he came to me, and got from me all I could tell him about the whole affair, and I believe he will tell you himself——”

“No, sir, no, sir—that’s your business, or Mr. Carling’s here.”

"Well, then, he declared very handsomely that, under the extraordinary circumstances which had come to light, he could not think of disturbing the evident intentions of his relative, General Fitzallan, and that he would have nothing more whatever to say to the property, one way or the other."

Fitzallan grew very white at this sudden and unexpected change in the prospects before him, but his ideas did not all at once adapt themselves to the new circumstances presented, and he could hardly be said to adequately grasp them as yet.

"Do you—surely you can't mean," he asked, looking round in bewilderment, "that I am still to retain, still to have the property, the whole property?"

"Yes, sir, yes, sir, the whole of it," cried the stranger, eagerly, and as though glad to be done with some unpleasantness weighing on his mind—"tisn't mine—never was—wouldn't touch it, sir—robbing the orphan, defrauding the poor of his wages. Mr. Carling, I think I'll be off, sir—think I'll be off."

"There's no particular need for you to stay,"

answered the lawyer, drily. He evidently looked upon his client as a fool, if not a lunatic. "But you must remain in town until the case comes on—that's certain. If you don't, the whole thing will drop through, and I won't be responsible."

Mr. Belmore plumped down again in his chair to consider the new view of things thus placed before him; while Fitzallan declared roundly—he began to see things now in their true light—that he had no claim whatever on the property and that, (beyond his mother's former annuity, which he confessed he should like to see restored,) if he got it again he shouldn't know what to do with it, as he was determined never again to lead the life from which he had been so rudely broken away. Then ensued what might well be called a scene of confusion, such as is rarely witnessed in the calm dulness of a respectable solicitor's *sanctum*, and the four men talked all together in a manner that was neither professional nor lucid.

Ultimately, and chiefly owing to the exertions of Mr. Martin, who was the only one of the party in a perfectly collected state, it was

arranged that the whole business should be submitted for the opinion of the most eminent counsel; that, if necessary, a friendly suit should be instituted between the two parties, and that in any case—for on that point Mr. Belmore, already, as he said, far more wealthy than he, an elderly and confirmed bachelor, at all cared to be, was adamant—the entire Fitzallan property should be restored to, or confirmed to, the young officer who had been so strangely disturbed in its possession. A preliminary draft-agreement to that effect was drawn up on the spot; and at last the restless Mr. Belmore was enabled to be off, to wander at his own sweet will whithersoever he listed, having solemnly promised to keep both solicitors posted up in his address, a week in advance of his movements, until he should be recalled to London to perform any duties in connection with the case.

With him—at least as far as the street corner, for beyond that space no man could calculate on Mr. Belmore's company—went Mr. Carling, determined to pin his client down to time and place as much as possible before he parted from him; and, when the door closed,

Mr. Martin crossed the room to the chair still occupied by the amazed and most chiefly interested personage engaged in the above scene, shook him most warmly by the hand, and congratulated him on the turn matters had taken. The old solicitor was pretty well accustomed to strange conduct on the part of his clients, but, speaking of this occasion afterwards, he confessed he had never been more astonished than by Fitzallan's action at the present juncture. He buried his face in his hands, as if to hide it from all human view ; and while his frame was violently convulsed, large tear-drops forced their way through his fingers, and in an agony of shame that his weakness should be witnessed, he jumped up suddenly, seized his hat, and abruptly rushed from the room and from the house without one word.

"Well, well," said Mr. Martin to himself, "this all comes of being in love, I suppose. Strange, men can be such fools ! Strong men, brave men, men that can ride straight to hounds, and fellows with the pluck and nerve of the very devil, as long as women are out of the field ! After all, they're only like great

overgrown babies ; and I'll be hanged if they don't want as much nursing and molly-coddling from the women.. I was never taken that way, and never will be, thank heaven ! nor was any other sensible bachelor that ever I heard of."

And the cynical old lawyer sat down in his easy-chair to console himself with his afternoon biscuits, curiously dry sherry, and the perusal of a learned dissertation on contracted feet in horses.

So far as Captain Fitzallan was concerned, Mr. Martin was undoubtedly right. That young gentleman was quite unnerved with the revolution of feelings brought on by the morning's work. He could not stay indoors or out ; he made himself a common nuisance to his neighbours in Tom Steadman's hotel, where he was stopping, by his unceasing unrest ; and, in sooth, he *did* need the "nursing and molly-coddling" of which his solicitor had spoken so contemptuously. More than that, he felt the need acutely, and it seemed to him that he must have woman's sympathy, or the fire of his blood would turn to fever that must lay him by the

heels. So, after a few days' restless pacing to and fro, seeking rest and finding none, he packed up his portmanteau and ran down to Chorlbury, nominally to see for himself to the real state of his mother's case, really to tell all to Maria Paulton, and listen to the low soft words of comfort and consolation which, now, he ever associated with her presence. Nor was he disappointed. His cousin was, of course, rejoiced to learn of the good deed of Mr. Belmore, but she had the delicacy to hold back from any very lengthy congratulation ; and after the first few necessary words of kind gladness had been spoken, she alluded to the subject no more, save in connection with his mother. Wisely or unwisely, as it might turn out to be, Maria had made up her mind that she would spare no effort to create a real natural love between these two so long, so cruelly, and so inhumanly kept apart by the action of the one who should have been the cherisher and guardian of the other all her life ; and Maria prayed fervently and almost hourly that the miserable attempt at a mother might be spared to repent of her almost lifelong crime, and live to be taken

truly and earnestly to the heart of a son who was, morally weak though he might be, as far superior to her as he was inferior to many others. And she sought to raise this love in his breast by means of pity. She showed him the wasted, burning form struggling on the couch of illness that her own sins had built up for her, and she put vividly before his mind all the cruel mental torments the poor wretch must have undergone in those raging days of her shame, or of her imagined shame, in India, before her nature could have become so perverted as to turn from the babe of her womb in horror, if not in relentless hatred. And Maria told him of his duty—duty not to fail because she had failed—and how glad he ought to be, and how grateful to Mr. Belmore, that there was no further need of anxiety on her account so far as worldly considerations went; and thus she brought his mind to a softened state, verging on the true pity she so much sought to excite; for well did she know that pity was akin to love.

But never a word did she say of Lady Clara, and when he bade her adieu once more, to re-

turn to London, he did not dream that his cousin had so much as wasted a thought on the lost idol of the altar of his heart. Maria-Paulton kept her own counsel, and in doing so, on that subject, at least, she displayed a wisdom with which few women similarly situated could have been credited.

"Hullo ! Fitz. Why, my dear fellow, it's just I that am delighted to see you," was the cheery greeting with which Fitzallan was saluted at Tom Steadman's Hotel; and when he turned to see who it was that had administered such a sounding slap to his shoulders, the honest rubicund face of Major Kavanagh shone like a polished copper kettle in his eyes, and he grasped the warm-hearted old soldier by the hand with an eagerness he had now almost forgotten the flavour of.

Then down came Mrs. Kavanagh too, her handsome matronly face beaming all over with smiles born of a good nature, a good heart, and a clean conscience, and the greetings were renewed, until the rest of the party in the Hotel came out to see what the disturbance Major Kavanagh was making could be all about; and then they adjourned to Tom Steadman's own

snuggery, where some of the Kinahan LL. was at once produced ; and even "Mrs. Hess" herself became infected with the Major's joviality, and actually smiled at, rather than reprobated, one or two old-fashioned and harmless oaths which her husband and the Paymaster rapped out when talking of old times, or of the recent experiences of the latter officer in Jamaica, whence he had only just returned.

But in the evening Fitzallan dined *tête-à-tête* with the Major and his good wife, and afterwards, over a bottle or so of rare old Madeira, the young man told the whole tale of all that had happened since the departure of the couple; and how bitterly he had rued not taking the advice of Kavanagh, to be cool, careful, and to take sound advice in the matter of Creasey's first abominable charge against his name. The Major was perfectly astounded (he had only been in England a few hours, and had merely heard from Tom Steadman that there had been what the latter unclassically termed "a rumpus") at the grave turn affairs had taken, and he did *not* bless the War Office people for sending him out of the country when he might easily, as he said, have cleared the whole thing

up in a brace of shakes, with the aid of cautious and reticent Tom Steadman.

"But, 'edad, Fitz, me dear boy, just will you tell us how about——?"

"Mick!" cried out his wife, in a tone as of sudden pain—for she saw, with a woman's quick perception, from the ghastly look of despair that had come over the younger man's face, that something was amiss,—“Mick, for mercy's sake, run down and get me a glass of brandy! I have a spasm.” And the startled Major at once toddled off on his errand.

She declared she could no longer bear the pain, and she met him on the landing. What passed Fitzallan knew not; but he heard no more allusion to Lady Clara, such as had been on the tip of the Major's tongue when his wife interrupted him.

But, Fitzallan having soon afterwards retired, Mrs. Kavanagh got the story in brief out of Tom Steadman before she went to bed; and the worthy couple did not sleep much that night, for they were both cudgelling their brains to devise some means of bringing on an explanation between the unfortunate young fellow and Lady Clara Burton.

## CHAPTER XIV.

"Is it Death, or new Life,  
You foreshadow to me?"

LADY CLARA BURTON sat in a drawing-room window of the Grosvenor Hotel, looking out on the dreary Winter day rendering the streets of London even more than normally abominable. But the dreariness of without was nothing to the dreariness of spirit abiding within the young girl. The joy, you could tell from the worn and haggard face, was blotted out of her life, hope therein had no abode, and melancholy of the most pitiful kind made her spirit its permanent abiding-place.

The Colonel was out on business at the War Office. His health had, so far from improving by their stay in the south of Europe, become too much impaired to allow of his remaining in the service, and he had returned to England to

arrange matters the best way he could for the most favourable sale of his commission. He had wished Lady Alice to remain in Naples with an English family there whose acquaintance they had made; but she point-blank refused to separate from him, and, not wishing to irritate her in the miserable mental state into which she appeared to have fallen, he at last gave way, and allowed her to accompany him. The reason why, contrary to all his usual selfish interests, he had desired her not to visit England, may be readily guessed at. He had, by the utmost care, successfully kept from her all knowledge of the horrible murder and suicide at Chorlbury, with the proceedings at the protracted inquest; and he had not experienced much difficulty in the matter, owing to the wretched listlessness which prevented her from ever picking up a newspaper, unless it was forced upon her; the warnings, as to the necessity for silence, which he gave to their few acquaintances in Italy; and the careful watch he kept over her correspondence—not, indeed, that it was at all likely that anyone would have written to her about such horrors, knowing her intimate connection with at least one of the principals concerned, Cap-

tain Fitzallan. But the Colonel feared that "some damned good-natured friend" would put her on the right track in England, and hence his objection to her making the journey.

However, when she had insisted upon it, he had no other course than to give way; and indeed, when he came to look closer into the affair, he began to think that his fears were groundless, as the few persons that would be likely to call upon them were not of the class to indulge in improprieties of a social nature, and to any others the Colonel could give a word of caution that would doubtless be effectual. He was right, for though their arrival was duly chronicled in the *Morning Post*, and thence copied into the Irish and other papers, only very few people of their acquaintance were in town at that desolate Winter season, and hardly any did more than leave cards. So the Colonel began to feel comfortable, and to permit his niece, as he called her, to be much more alone than she had been during the first few days of their arrival.

As she sat at the window, gazing out on the wretchedness of the weather, it seemed to her more consonant with her feelings than had been

the everlasting garish brightness of the view from their Naples quarters; for painful contrast was absent, and, miserable herself, there was something of satisfaction in seeing a miserable state of the elements.

She was not looking out towards the front of the hotel, but on the side of the railway-station, and hence she had not noticed—and if she had, she would have thought nothing of it—the arrival at the main entrance of a plain carriage, containing some personages who were in search of herself.

A servant entered, saying that two ladies wished to see Lady Clara Burton, and almost before she could signify either assent or dissent, there walked in Maria Paulton, and, leaning on her arm, the shattered wreck of what once was Esther Wyatt.

It was with some difficulty that Lady Clara remembered Mrs. Paulton—Miss Wyatt she had hardly ever known—and it was with more difficulty that she performed the needful acts of politeness, for she could not but feel very considerably astonished at such a strange visit. Maria, though evidently nervous, was at the

same time confident; and when she had seen the feeble convalescent safely seated on the sofa—Esther was trembling violently, and her face seemed to bear the look of death—she begged a moment or two's private conversation with Lady Clara; and the latter, more astonished than ever, took her into an adjacent boudoir. There Mrs. Paulton rapidly but clearly gave the unhappy girl an outline of the extraordinary history of the inquest at Chorlbury, keeping, however, the main events as concerned Fitzallan's real birth, &c., to herself, and said that Miss Wyatt, who had been mixed up in the case, had suffered a brain-fever in consequence, and learning, on her recovery, that Lady Clara was in London, had begged and prayed, with all the piteous prayers of a woman who appeared to be dying, that an interview might be given her, as she had matters of the gravest consequence to impart.

In great confusion, for she by no means could see the clear connection of what Maria had told her, Lady Clara said that of course she should be happy to hear anything Miss Wyatt might have to say; and they returned to the drawing-

room to find Esther, now sitting upright on the sofa, firm with the firmness of her powerful will, and the great eyes flashing with the efforts she had so successfully made to command both her own mind and body.

Then she revealed all to the frightened girl, who leant against the mantelpiece in a sort of daze; and she told it with a rare skill, that put all in the best order, kept nothing back, and yet was so well arranged that the *dénouement* was worked up to so naturally that Lady Clara's astonishment was far less than might have been expected. All through Esther told the tale of her own folly, her own wild passions, her own cruelty and her own subsequent life of sin, and defiance of the laws of nature and of God, in the third person, though it was easy to see that the heroine, if not herself, was at least her most intimate friend. On the fine qualities of the abandoned child, his cleverness, his bravery, his generosity, and so forth, she touched with a sad pathos, telling its own tale; and then she rose to her feet, with all the spring and energy of thirty years back, and cried, while one hand was held up, to the full

length of the arm, towards heaven, in token of the truth of what was coming,

“And I am that cruelly inhuman mother—the son was and is *my* son—Captain Fitzallan, so called, born in lawful wedlock of the man whose very name I dread to think of—Colonel de Courcey Calverley.”

“It is a lie!—a foul, damnable lie!”

The door burst open, and the Colonel, who had from the outside heard the latter portion of the terrible tale, rushed into the room, uttering the words. Simultaneously Lady Clara shrieked under the influence of uncontrollable excitement, and Maria ran over to support her, thinking the girl would faint or go off in a fit of hysterics; the while Esther Wyatt stood erect and defiant, fire flashing from her eyes as she saw the miserably selfish wretch who had blasted all her life; while in tones of the coldest and yet bitterest scorn she repeated the words, omitting, however, what she had formerly said about dreading to think of him.

“Leave the room!” roared the Colonel, foaming with rage—“leave the room, you—you—you lying harridan! Clara, come to me, my

darling child! These lying creatures must be turned out if they will not go."

He went towards Lady Clara, but she shrank from him as if in terror; and Maria faced him as one would imagine a tigress facing the assailant of its offspring.

"Lying creatures!" she cried—"the liar and the scoundrel is Colonel Calverley. Would you have proof? You shall, and that in a moment."

She rang the bell violently three times, and then she returned to her post by her aunt and Lady Clara, who, white as marble and shivering with the intensity of her astonishment, looked as one half crazed.

"Ay, proof!" said Esther Wyatt, with cold determination—"proof?—he wants no proof. But if he did, there are oceans of it. Lady Clara, he it is that has deceived you, not my son. He has known the truth for a year at least, perhaps for much longer, and he has kept it from you; he would not have you marry his son, lest you both should scorn him into the grave. What my son kept from you, he kept back in the delirium of his love; what that old man has kept from you, has been kept because

of the selfish malice which is the breath of his life. Oh! child, child, there is a mighty field of happiness before you, if you will but turn your foot towards it—take heed lest you put from you again the chance of a love that comes but once to anyone—seldom to more than a very few out of the world's millions. My son has, and is——”

There entered the room, in answer to Maria's agreed, upon signal, Mr. Martin, Mr. Carling, with Mr. Belmore; while on the landing remained the Kavanaghs, Tom Steadman, and one or two others.

The Colonel sank into a chair, perspiration streaming through every pore from the fire of baffled rage burning within him; and there was a ghastly expression of mingled terror and despair in his features, horrid to look upon. Then Maria Paulton turned to the new-comers, and asked them if it was not true that her aunt and—oh! what a curl of contempt did her lip wear as she uttered the words—this man were husband and wife, and that their child was Henry Fitzallan?

The answers, put of course professionally,

were full and complete ; and indeed Mr. Carling was prepared, he said, to produce from his brief-bag a complete synopsis of the evidence that had been taken in the matter.

“But there is no need for that—I have here a letter from Mr. Ernest Clarke, in which that gentleman says that the Colonel was aware of the truth long, long ago, and had warned him to be most careful, lest Lady Clara should have any idea of what was going forward, ‘Because,’ the letter says, quoting the Colonel’s very words, ‘then she would certainly marry this fellow—I cannot even now acknowledge him—and throw me over in my old age and feebleness.’ I think that settles the matter, eh, gentlemen ?—and ladies, eh ?”

No one spoke, and there was a death-like pause for a few moments, during which all eyes were turned on the wretched egotist who had caused such profound misery to almost everyone with whom he had come into contact. Then Calverley rose to his feet, steadied himself for a moment against the back of a chair, and in a low husky voice spoke :

“Clara, I acknowledge it is the truth ; but I

kept it from you for your own good. The man—my son, I suppose I must say—is a pauper now—he has not a farthing——”

“Wrong, sir, wrong, sir,” blurted out Mr. Belmore—“he has every shilling he ever had—I give up all claim.”

“That is so,” said the two solicitors, in a breath.

The Colonel started violently; then he calmed himself sufficiently to speak:

“I did not know that, Clara; how could I? But I acted for your good—indeed, indeed I did it for your good. Will you come with me?”

The girl shuddered from head to foot, as though a strong electric shock had been passed through her; but then she grew rigid as marble, and her lips were almost white when she opened them to speak. All she said was,

“I cannot!”

And as the deadly firmness of the tones fell on the old man’s ear, he knew that all was passed away between them, and he turned and slowly left the room—left Lady Clara Burton for ever.

And she fell into Maria Paulton's arms in an agony of tears.

The others, save Esther, left the room, and when Lady Clara looked up again, the first torrent of her grief subsided, there was standing beside her Henry Fitzallan.

Softly did Maria Paulton, and as if it was a mere matter of course, lead Esther out to another apartment, and in five minutes—perhaps five seconds would be more correct—had Fitzallan taken to his heart the idol of his life; and the ineffable sweetness of the words of forgiveness almost more than compensated for the terrible mental tortures the lovers had gone through.

The marriage, which took place as soon as possible, was a very quiet one, the only guests being the Paultons and the Kavanaghs; and the joviality of the Major, and the chuckling of honest Jack, had, as may well be imagined, to be frequently frowned down or otherwise assailed by their respective wives. It was from Tom Steadman's hotel, and "Mrs. Hess" was in her glory as witness to the end of "a romance in 'igh life" which at one time, as a mystery, had caused her a great deal of anxiety.

Of course Esther, feeble though she was, lay on a sofa, calmly enjoying the happiness of others, one of them her own son, in a manner she had never expected again to enjoy anything; but none of the rest of the clan were present. They were consoled, however, with the reflection that another member of their family—for when all came out they gladly claimed Fitzallan (who had legally taken out the right to still bear that name) as a near relative—was marrying into “the nobs;” and “Old Nick” was almost crazy to think that he could claim the sister of an earl for his niece, though “by marriage.”

But that marriage was the last as well as the first of Esther Wyatt’s (she continued to keep that name) new-found happiness, and the dream of Maria Paulton’s later days was never realised. Human nature is but human nature after all; everyone is full of faults, and, as we have seen, Henry Fitzallan had his share—far more than his share, some people thought—of grave ones. Not being able to quite forgive so as to come to love the mother who had deserted him, may not, in the proper sense of the word, be a fault at all; but, whether it was, or whether it

was not, it remains a fact, and that fact was the cruellest, if perhaps the justest punishment meted out to that sinful mother. It was terrible pain to her, but she bowed her head to endure it with a grace she had not known from her childhood up, and she laid the burden at the feet of that great God who had seen fit, in His mercy, while taking away the health of her body, to give her back that health of the soul without which the mere act of living is nearly sinful. Her Fatalism fled from her for ever; her belief in Christianity, and her carrying out of its active precepts, so far as her feebleness would allow, became the only joy she knew. If not happy, she was at least content to bear her unhappiness for Christ's sake; and so had she been taken back into the fold from which her own hot passions had, in the days long gone by, first dragged her out.

The Wrigleys are still worming their way through life—very devout, very much hand-in-hand with good young clergymen innocent of the deeper wickednesses of the world, very Christian in language and demeanour, but—must we say it?—very rotten of heart. The persua-

sion of the Pharisee is, after all, an eminently respectable one, and it has the merit of comprising in its "Church-membership" many more millions of people all the world over than that world is at all aware of.

You may see Colonel de Courcey Calverley any day his gout will permit him—and they are not many—in the window of "The Rag and Famish;" but when laid by the heels through the action of his ancient enemy, the dingiest of all the dingy back-parlours in Ryder Street claims him as master. No one goes to see him, no one writes to inquire after him, no one cares one jack-straw whether he is well or ill, dead or alive; and he will die in that lonely and darksome den some day or night, and not one human being in the whole earth—save and except, perhaps, Lady Clara, who cannot forget that once she loved him like a father—will feel even the slightest twinge of grief, or turn and say, "Well, I'm sorry for the poor old chap."

He now *knows*—and it is the bitterest portion of his punishment—that his own horrible selfishness has brought upon him the loneliness, and the desolation and the insatiable misery of perfect

abandonment by all his fellow-beings ; and it is agonising to think, as he does think, that neither in this world nor the next will there be a lightening of the pall of darkness which in his earliest days he commenced to manufacture, which grew larger and larger as grew his care for self, and which he dragged down on his own head solely and entirely by his own deed.

Even Mrs. Pemmican cut him dead the first time they encountered in Rotten Row, after the world had got to know the whole of the story of "A Child of Fortune," as some wild wag nicknamed Fitzallan.

THE END.

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